

HALO: REACH

BUNGIE'S LAST HALO FINISHES THE FIGHT

QUANTUM THEORY

TECMO'S MISSION TO CREATE A 'SOFTER' ACTION SHOOTER

BEAT MANIFESTO

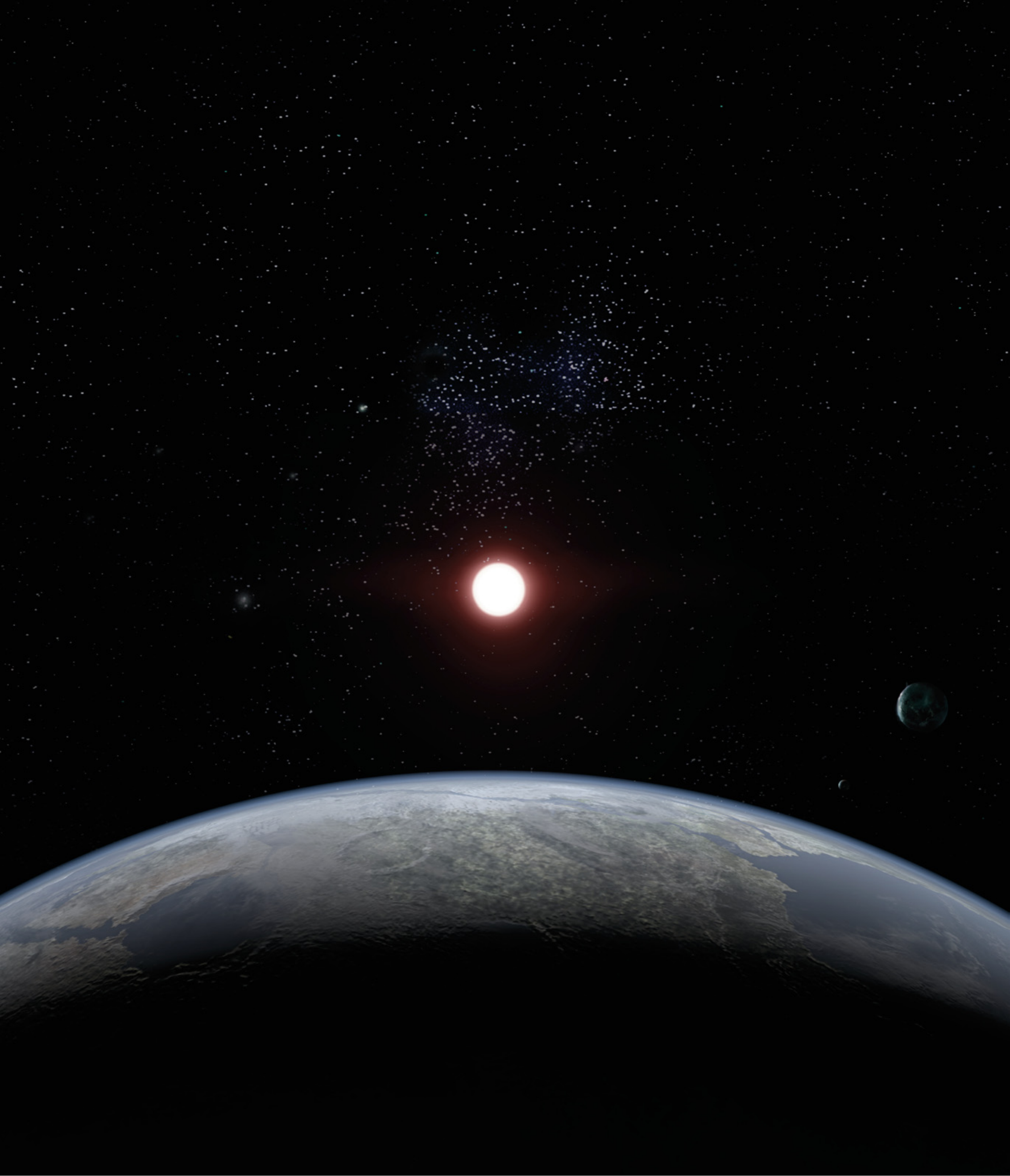
HARMONIX AND NEVERSOFT ON MUSIC GAMING'S FUTURE

GAME REPUBLIC

FROM GIANT ENEMY CRABS TO CLASH OF THE TITANS

REVIEWED

HALF-MINUTE HERO
ALIEN BREED EVO
ARMY OF TWO 2
DARKSIDERS
TORCHLIGHT
DARK VOID





When you've had as much success within your chosen genre as Bungie has with the *Halo* series, the temptation to stick with what you know – and with what has brought you so much fortune and glory – must be difficult to resist. If we are to believe the developer's claims, though, this month's cover game, *Halo: Reach*, will be its final expedition into the universe that first brought us a reboot of the firstperson shooter and then continual refinement. Far from hastily lobbing the game out of the door in order to simply fulfil an obligation, however, Bungie is assembling its latest FPS with its usual extreme attention to detail. In the process, it's creating its most technically and visually accomplished production to date. Our *Halo: Reach* report begins on p48.

Tecmo is another company seeking to break out of the areas with which it has become so closely associated in recent years, and on p56 we look at *Quantum Theory*, an unusual thirdperson shooter with western audiences in its sights. On p62 we talk to Game Republic, another Japanese developer with ambitions of making it big outside of its home territory. Its debut PS3 project, *Genji: Days Of The Blade*, will be forever associated with over-sized crustaceans whose weak points should be attacked for massive damage, but its current projects, the movie licence *Clash Of The Titans* and an original game, *Majin: The Fallen Realm*, seem destined to attract attention for more positive reasons.

Bungie, Tecmo and Game Republic are going through a process of evolution. Matching the *Halo* series' success with new IP will be difficult enough for Bungie, but developers in Japan face battles of a higher order as they continue to look beyond their native market. We'll keep a spotlight focused on the region as it continues to tackle new challenges.

One game featured this issue that is already a huge success, just by virtue of even existing, is *Chime*, the first release under the OneBigGame banner. Its development team provided their time, dedication and expertise for nothing, and all proceeds from sales will go to charity. It'll be followed by further OneBigGame titles, and on p76 we recount the story behind a feel-good videogame industry initiative that everyone can get behind.



Image from Alpha Protocol, courtesy of Obsidian Entertainment, Inc.

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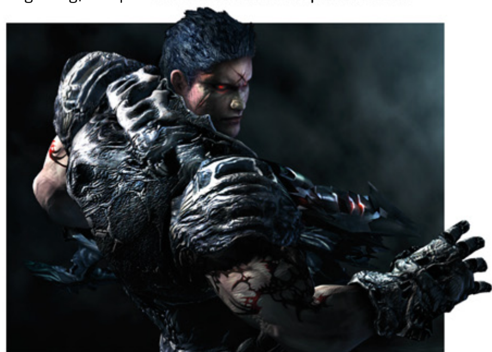


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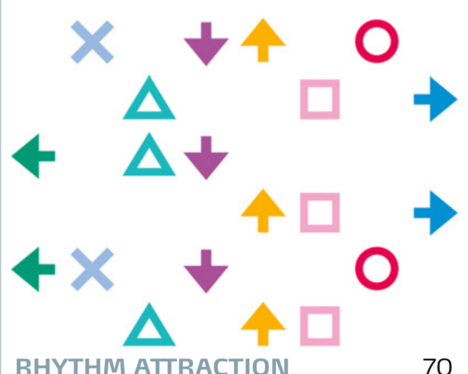
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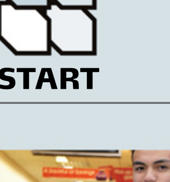












START












START
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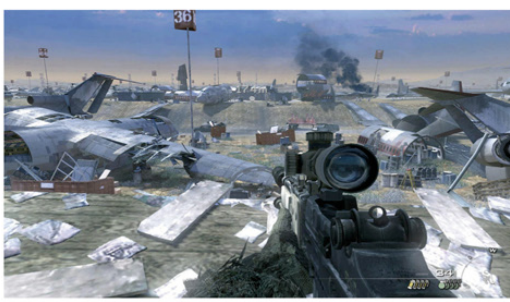
What economic crisis?

Despite an overall year-on-year drop for UK game industry revenues, individual retailers recorded growth in 2009

Despite a sluggish start to the year, 2009 bucked both the ongoing economic slump and the concerns of uneasy British retailers to deliver unexpectedly positive results. Total software sales for the year generated £1.621bn, compared to 2008's record total of £1.905bn. The £284m drop may seem like a significant one, but it's against the backdrop of a rapidly growing second-hand market, and increasingly aggressive price-cutting policies among supermarket chains.

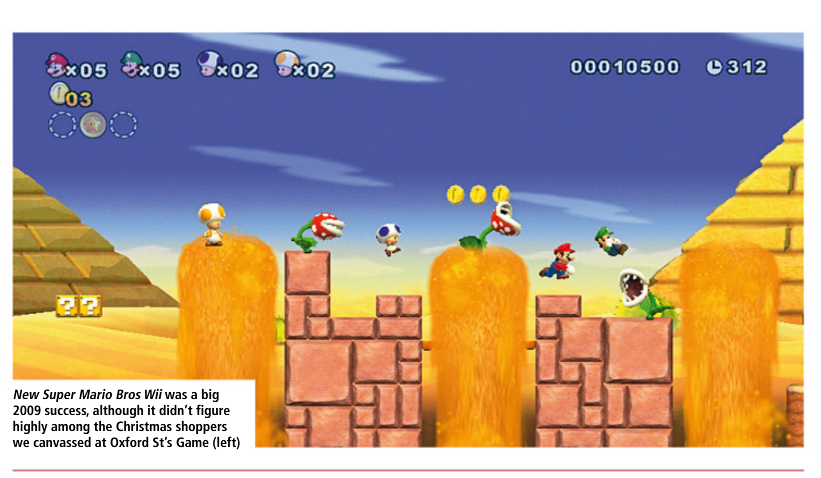
"Last year was on a fairly even par with 2008 in terms of performance," says **Piers Harding-Rolls**, head of games at media analyst Screen Digest. "A lot of that can be put down to the various lifecycles of devices currently in the market" – something that makes the usual year-on-year comparisons of the market a little muddied – "but the final decline of the PS2 and a 30 per cent decrease in Wii hardware sales were negative factors offset by an increase in sales of the PlayStation 3, following its redesign and price reduction in September, and the consistent popularity of Xbox 360, both of which ensured market performance evened out."

Nevertheless, 2009 was a tale of two halves, with the successful Christmas 2008 period followed by conservative consumer spending throughout the early months of the year. This may be behind the many delays of original IP until the Christmas '09 quarter – "a technique to overcome the wider economic situation that threatened the start of the year," suggests Harding-Rolls. Despite this, for retailers, the year as a whole was largely positive. Online retailer Shopto.net saw a 112 per cent increase in unit sales in 2009 over the previous year – success that required a doubling of staff numbers and led to an overall 70 per cent increase in turnover by the end of the calendar year.



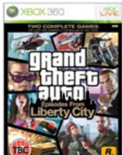
The winner: Activision and Infinity Ward's *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* now stands as the biggest entertainment launch in history, and scared many other games out of 2009

Likewise, Grainger Games, one of the UK's largest independent retailers with a portfolio of 25 stores across the north east of England, continued its expansion over the past 12 months and, according to sales director **Phil Moore**, enjoyed "continued growth off the back of what was already a record-breaking 2008." In terms of the high street giants, HMV also continued a positive trend in year-on-year growth – a success that the entertainment retailer puts down to gaming, which



New Super Mario Bros Wii **was a big 2009 success, although it didn't figure highly among the Christmas shoppers we canvassed at Oxford St's Game (left)**













Uncharted 2 (left) and Microsoft's star brand in the form of *Halo 3: ODST* both likely exceeded three million sales over Christmas

formed "an increasingly important [aspect] to our business in 2009," according to company spokesman **Gennaro Castaldo**.

However, 2009 was not without individual upsets – positive and negative – at retail. "*Killzone 2* was perhaps the largest disappointment of the first half of 2009, with Sony placing a lot of expectation on the title to drive hardware sales that never materialised," says Harding-Rolls, laying the blame on the console's high price point at the time of release, rather than the game itself. "Sales of the PSP Go console have been below our predictions, as were sales of *DJ Hero*," says **Igor Cipolletta**, owner of Shopto.net. "Conversely, *FIFA 10* and *Uncharted 2* were very strong sellers, although I wouldn't say they over-performed so much as maintained projections and pre-order levels. Meanwhile, *Just Dance* has been a huge, unexpected success over the Christmas period, proving there's still room for a strong TV-advertised family game in the market."

For Ubisoft, the success of *Just Dance* and its other family-oriented products ably demonstrates the continuing strength of this market. "*Just Dance* significantly outperformed our expectations," says Ubisoft's UK MD **Rob Cooper**. "It sold out almost immediately and continued to stock-out right up to the new year." At the time of writing, *Just Dance* has rather sensationally overtaken the PS3 version of *Modern Warfare 2* in the UK charts: Captain Price didn't see *those* tangos coming. "We also saw great success on our range of adult Nintendo DS games, such as *Puzzler World*, *Take A Break* and *Classic Word Games*, which continued to sell at consistently high levels throughout the year," adds Cooper. "In part, we think this is down to the fact that parents are picking up their son's or daughter's DS and enjoying the fact that they can engage and have relevant, fun gaming experiences too."

Despite the annual predictions at the start of 2009 about the rise of downloadable content and the knock-on effects for boxed media, in reality no one felt the virtual pinch. Moore of Grainger Games told us straight: "Digital distribution hasn't affected our business a great deal in 2009. [While] we're focusing our minds on the opportunity that digital distribution could present [to] retailers, we've been more intent on developing and improving our current online proposition."

Shopto's Cipolletta agrees: "We've seen with PSP Go that the market isn't ready for a digital-only game console, especially at a price point so close to the PS3." And what of the threat, for example, from Microsoft's Games On Demand service? Cipolletta: "DLC for 'established' consoles has increased and, in most cases, adds value to existing titles. However, this is in regard to additional content rather than what you would term 'games on demand', which gamers perceive as being overpriced compared to physical media and which cannot be traded in or sold once finished with." Considering you can often pick up a boxed copy of the same game for less than half the price (pre-owned, admittedly), it's of little interest to savvy consumers.

HMV is similarly straightforward about 2009 ("Digital distribution didn't have any major effect") but is optimistic about the future transition, and investing in it. "Like all parties in the games business, we know it's gradually coming," says Castaldo, "and are working on laying foundations to prepare for this. HMV recently acquired 50 per

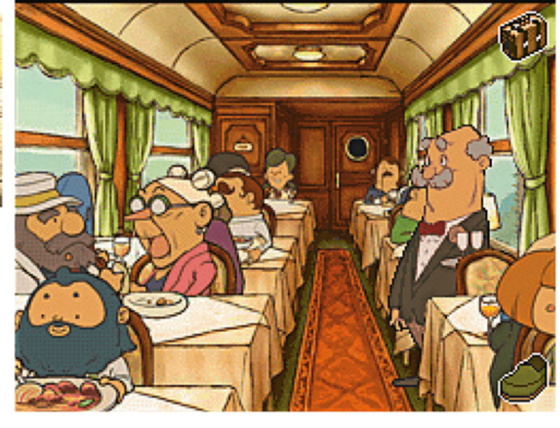




Grainger's Phil Moore reckons "a strong franchise-based lineup catered for everyone this year". The stellar *Street Fighter IV* did for us. Ubisoft's Rob Cooper emphasises *Assassin's Creed II*'s 30-hour playtime: "Consumers get such good value for money from the big games"

















***Wii Fit Plus* (main) and *Professor Layton And Pandora's Box* (left) did big numbers in 2009. Indeed, Nintendo published eight of the top ten games in Amazon's list of top 100 sellers for the year, but many thirdparty titles for Nintendo's hardware, such as *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars* (top), recorded disappointing sales, highlighting the gulf that still exists between the platform holder and its partners**

cent of digital services provider 7digital, which will give us greater understanding and expertise and will, hopefully, enable us to build a compelling platform that will also extend to games." A comment which implies the industry may be rather myopic in thinking of the digital distribution 'takeover' solely in terms of videogames.

"It's going to be a slow transition," says Harding-Rolls. "In terms of console-specific digital games, there's been something of a retreat from the retail-equivalent downloads, and now most console download titles are made up of expansion packs and arcade download games." Consumers talk with money, and at the moment their voices are in favour of retail. Harding-Rolls: "Spend on those types of products is increasingly strong, but it's important to note that it's nowhere near retail levels, with something like a single-digit percentage slice of the market. Certainly throughout 2009, digital distribution hasn't had much impact on the sales of digital media."

"Spend on digital products is increasingly strong, but it's important to note that it's nowhere near retail levels, with something like a single-digit percentage slice of the market"

As Cipolletta says, the obvious lack of trade-in value with digital content also apparently feeds into consumer hesitation. But this is in the context of a year in which second-hand sales and trade-in offers have increasingly driven sales of new titles. "Pre-owned sales generally increased in 2009 as the whole 'offer' becomes more mainstream," claims Grainger Games' Moore. "With major high street names having launched into pre-owned and other major chains financially reporting on pre-owned, I think the legitimisation of this revenue stream has encouraged customers to buy into it."

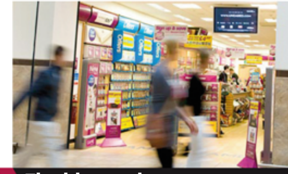
For HMV, which began selling pre-owned games in 2008, this 'legitimisation' (the inverted commas are for pre-owned games' harshest critic, David Braben) of trading in has been a success. "Sales are increasing as more gamers pick up on the value that pre-played games can offer – especially in recessionary times," says Castaldo.

And while we're discussing value, another trend from 2009 was the waning of the music game market, which saw many high-profile rhythm-action titles undergoing dramatic price reductions ahead of Christmas. "I think there are two sides to this decline," says Harding-Rolls. "With four or five versions of *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* being released over a relatively short amount of time, not to mention the add-on content that's followed each, there's a decline in appetite to keep consuming that amount of content on an ongoing basis. Also, players are unlikely to spend money on peripherals on a regular basis, which undermines the value proposition of that market."

For retailers, the physical size of these games, combined with the fast iterative cycle, presents problems. "It's dangerous to be housing large stacks of games with peripherals that take up space in stock rooms and distribution centres," says Cipolletta. "Many retailers are taking decisions to shift units at a reduced price rather than risking still having them in stock when the next iteration comes to its release date. Because of the expense, consumers are more likely to wait for reviews rather than preordering on faith."

No such issue for Activision's *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. In addition to remaining at the number one slot for the remainder of the year following its release, Infinity Ward's shooter dominated the competition in other ways, most obvious in the number of key titles from other publishers delayed until early 2010. "This turned out to be a sensible decision because the game blew everything around it out of the water," says Harding-Rolls, "but the wider effect is that we now have a slew of high-profile titles set for release in early 2010." So, in contrast to 2009, 2010 is set to open with a relative bang, and stay steady in an economic malaise by offering value that other entertainment industries simply can't match.

When looking at bald sales numbers we should keep in mind the importance to retail of second-hand, that such activity falls outside of the radar of ChartTrack/ELSPA, and that the past year has seen the majority of the hardware and software price-cutting we'll see during this generation. Much of that £284m hasn't necessarily disappeared, then – it may just be sitting elsewhere.



The big numbers

Key figures from UK game retail for 2009

- **Total revenue generated by videogame market: £3.311 billion**
- **Total software sales: £1.621 billion**
- **Total hardware sales: £1.06 billion**
- **Total software units sold: 74.6 million**
- **Total hardware units sold: 6.7 million**
- **Total value of console/PC peripherals sold: £630 million**
- **Total accessories sold: 35.8 million**
- **Best-selling software format: Xbox 360, with £459 million in revenue**

(Data courtesy of ELSPA)

INTERVIEW

EA's changing focus

EA Montreal's Alain Tascan explains how his studio is retreating from Wii game production – at least for now

It was only June of last year that CEO John Riccitiello was affirming EA's increased commitment to Nintendo's Wii. Five months later, he expressed disappointment in the platform, an announcement that preceded EA Montreal shelving its substantial casual game production and turning to bigger HD titles, such as *Army Of Two: The 40th Day* (see p84). At the end of 2009 we sat down with EA Montreal's general manager, **Alain Tascan** (left), to better understand which way Wii's wind blows.

Tascan: "We're seeing Canada come from nowhere as a power player – eastern Canada, Quebec and Montreal in particular. The number of titles coming out of this small place is very interesting"

Between June and November EA radically reappraised its approach to Wii, with Montreal turning away from the platform altogether. What changed in this short time?
I think, pooling together everything we've done for the Wii, it's been successful – obviously EA Montreal has done a lot of Wii titles. We're more in a holding pattern right now, looking at sales from Christmas and Black Friday. I feel the Wii is a very difficult market to apprehend, and the efforts we made weren't as successful as we hoped. Was it the right timing? The right approach? I don't know, but we felt we needed to react to the market. People often talk about EA lagging behind and copying, and I feel that now we're showing we can react very fast to the Wii.

"We did games on GameCube, Xbox, PS2, Xbox 360, PS3, PSP and DS – from hockey and racing to dancing and shooting. It was crazy. We needed to focus to be more effective"

I feel – and this is just a personal opinion – that Wii counts as a soft transition; it wasn't a hardware transition so much as how people play games, how much they're willing to pay for games, and how they engage. Faced with these many flavours and varieties of games, EA is focusing the efforts of each studio rather than have everyone try and do everything. In our case, we were the first studio to open from scratch within EA. We did games on GameCube, Xbox, PS2, 360, PS3, PSP and DS – from hockey and racing to dancing and shooting. It was crazy. We needed to focus to be more effective. *Army Of Two: The 40th Day* is the first step toward this.

But what were the specific things that signalled the need to move away from Wii between John Riccitiello's announcements?
We had a few signals, but the market just started being unpredictable a few months ago. But to tell you the truth, we don't know. We'll know more in a few weeks. I'm always excited when we have these changing moments. People right now have access to so many more ways to entertain themselves, on so many different devices and at so many different price points – if not for free. What promise of entertainment is needed for you to put your hand in your pocket? It's no

EA addressed the tone of its *Army Of Two* IP for the second game (see p84) following criticism of the original. *The 40th Day* (above) may yet provoke certain audiences, however

longer viable just to put something in a box and hope people buy it.

EA Montreal has been renowned for its casual games and Wii titles in the past. What kind of change does this refocusing bring to its staff?
We're still hiring, but we're looking at our talent pool to see who's ready to do this thing and offer specific training to adapt our roster to the type of game we want to do. In the past, we've been able to engage people and be successful commercially, but we've been less efficient at reaching the highest quality possible. If you look at the people who are reaching that quality, they're uber-focused. Whether that's Epic or BioWare, the best in class are doing one thing and doing it well.

Isn't refocusing the studio on the thirdperson shooter genre propelling it into the most high-risk market you could aim for, short of the MMOG space?
It is if you're just trying to be a copycat. But we try to have an angle or twist. We had this question when we did *Army Of Two* – it was a sub-niche of the most competitive genre – but we wanted to try it. We had some, uh, very constructive reviews. We had 70 of them, in various languages. One reviewer said it was the most awful game in the world, but it sold almost 3m units. I do think the tone [of the game] was off. People who were sensitive to politics were like, "You can't do that!" and I understand them. That's why we corrected it. We all have pattern recognition, certain codes that you import. The code of *Army Of Two* is friendship. Whenever something happens – maybe your wife is cheating on you, you've been fired from your job and it's raining – you always have a friend one phone call away. This is low-level psychology, but I think this is what people connect with in co-op games. That's why I think that even within this competitive genre, we can carve out a niche.

Going back to *Army Of Two*'s change of tone, was there a perception when working on the first game that this sort of thing didn't matter – that it was just a game?
It's a funny thing. This team is made up of 18 nationalities, but we still managed to piss off everybody. People on the right thought we were on the left, and people on the left thought we were on the right. The reality is we had recordings of mercenaries on the field – that's where the tampon came from [used in preview builds to stuff wounds], and in the end we had to pull it. What we've learned is that if we're doing massmarket titles, we have to treat these subjects lightly. We should have known better.

How has the Chinese market reacted to the setting of *Army Of Two: The 40th Day*?
That's the good part! Do you know the console market in China?

Well, we know it's rife with piracy.
Exactly, so I would say, who cares? [Laughs] I'm very curious to see how they react. I think we might have a letter from the government there. But the bad guys aren't Chinese. Yes, you can kill Chinese and destroy their beautiful city in the game, but hopefully they'll understand it's entertainment.







WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Just as the Xbox Indie service starts to produce some real crackers, the sheer quantity of rubbish threatens to overwhelm even the most dedicated browser. XNPlay is a simple site that is very useful to stick on your RSS reader, as every week it rounds up releases and gives a pithy description and costing of each.

Take a few recent examples. Thinking about buying *Block Fight!!*? Then think again: "Not to be confused with *Block Fight!*, this is barely a program, much less a game. 80 Points". Having dodged that bullet, perhaps *Akujin* is attracting your fancy. You should have known better: "A button-color based shooter with no obvious indication of which color to use and plentiful cheap hits from nearly-invisible projectiles. 240 Points".

It's not all acerbic dismissals. XNPlay is clearly a labour of love, and when a game comes along that deserves a little more coverage, it gets it – as in the case with the recent (and excellent) *Leave Home*. It's an invaluable guide to the XBLIG swamp, and precisely the sort of thing the service needs to guide users towards the diamonds.

Site:
XNPlay
URL:
xnplay.co.uk

INTERVIEW

The Global vision

Hi-Rez Studios has its work cut out as it jetpacks into an open field with PC MMOG Global Agenda

At this point the action-MMOG genre resembles an elephant graveyard, but it's not only *All Points Bulletin* that will be daring to soon tread among the grand old bones of *Planetside*, *Hellgate: London* and *Tabula Rasa*. Hi-Rez Studios' self-published sci-fi shooter *Global Agenda* (see p34) will be right there beside it, and while Hi-Rez might not have Realtime Worlds' funding, it's had enough time to formulate a unique approach to the genre. Buying the game itself gets you access to PvP and PvE missions, while going on to subscribe opens up a persistent world of territorial warfare spread over a hex map. We talk to executive producer **Todd Harris** about forging ahead in the face of financial terror.

How did the decision to move forward with *Global Agenda* come about?

As a studio we're something of a unique story. We're entirely self-funded by one entrepreneur in the Atlanta area. Erez Goren co-founded the studio and he wrote games for the Atari way back before the videogame crash of the '80s. He made a fortune creating business software for things like point-of-sale systems, inventory management, and other things which were more boring than games. But he was always a big gamer, and eventually he earned enough money to make a game on his own terms, and *Global Agenda* was his vision.

Being self-published must give you a lot of creative freedom.

Absolutely. We have freedom of game design, art style, and to some extent freedom of schedule. It's allowed us to be iterative in our development, and have a long pre-production schedule. We've been playing the game for the last three years; we use daily builds and bring in lots of external groups to play the game. It's also given us the chance to experiment and try stuff which didn't work out, but ultimately the best ideas have risen to the top.

Does that mean it took time to figure out the fine details of Erez Goren's vision?

The core principles have always remained the same – we wanted a game with a persistent universe so the actions of the players would matter, but also something fast-paced and team-centric that would move away from the tab targeting of more familiar fantasy MMOs.

The action-MMOG is a genre that's enjoyed little commercial success in the last few years,





Harris (left) laughs about *GA*'s original 'spy-fi' setting: "Things like disguises and sleep darts were fun in PvE, less so in PvP"



"This is a question of a small number of very zealous gamers trying to impose their will on society. And I think harm society. It's the public interest versus the small vested interest."
Australian Attorney General **Michael Atkinson** reinforces how much fun it is to be a fan of videogames Down Under

"Llamasoft: founded in 1982, one of the longest-established software houses in existence, and still actually making software rather than simply trying to sue anyone who dares to use the words 'llama' or 'soft' in their games."
Jeff Minter serves up a festive double pack of *Gridrunner Revolution* and *Space Giraffe*, before hitting the eggnog and blasting out a press release

"This ornate scythe comes from the arsenal of Death himself and allows War to smite his foes from a distance with ease."
THQ explains The Harvester, a pre-order bonus in-game weapon for *Darksiders*, which goes a good way towards alleviating your smiting woes

"The demand for top-tier products is okay. The demand for lower-tier products is not so clear. The safest place to be is in triple-A."
Take-Two director **Strauss Zelnick** confirms *Grand Theft Auto: Modern Warfare*. Perhaps he's simply forgotten about *Carnival Games*

"PRESS RELEASE: Downloadable PC Games Make Great Last-Minute Gifts"
Telltale Games reaches out to the wider casual market. Let's hope grandma didn't have her heart set on something from PopCap

"'One day George started pushing for snow levels,' recalls a developer who worked on *Duke Nukem Forever* for several years starting in 2000. Why? 'He had seen *The Thing* and he wanted it.' The staff developed a running joke: If a new title comes out, don't let George see it."
Wired's **Clive Thompson** uncovers the extent of George Broussard's attitude towards feature creep at 3D Realms



INTERVIEW

Tipping the Fez

'Prematurely' revealed at GDC 2008, Fez has proved to be a challenging debut game for the team at Polytron

Before being thrust into the industry limelight with an Independent Game Festival win for the visual design of innovative 2D/3D platformer *Fez*, Polytron co-founder **Phil Fish**, who had "always known" he was going to make videogames, worked at more than one of Montreal's big-name developers, calling it "an awful, dark period of [his] life".

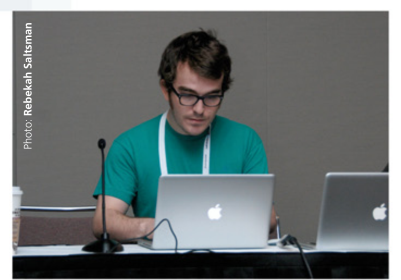
Having his eyes opened to the indie development scene by the Kokoromi collective's Heather Kelly, Fish formed Polytron with musician Jason DeGroot and fresh-out-of-university programmer Renaud Bédard. The rest would be history, but for their continued struggle to get the eagerly awaited *Fez* into shape, battling not only design issues but also the pressure of expectation.

How is *Fez* progressing right now?
It's been a really hard game to figure out. We discovered that the core concept of the game – that you have a rotatable 2D view of a 3D space – was too hard for the average player. What I considered the simplest level I could make was too hard for people to play at the start of the game.

So the difficulty curve has been really difficult to get right. There are a lot of tricky concepts that we have to introduce really quickly, and it's hard to get it across to the player without too much hand-holding, or tutorials and text… I feel that only recently we've really figured out what the best part of the game is and how to structure levels to exploit the core mechanic in a way that isn't too intense. At first, we needed rotation all the time; you could barely move two steps without using it. That turned out way too much – people got super-disorientated. Plus, players couldn't understand the rules of the world. So, for example, when you rotate the screen, if something goes behind a tower, it doesn't exist any more. What you can see from your point of view is the absolute truth. That's been the biggest challenge – really understanding the game.

During playtesting we discovered some really surprising things, like the player who would never turn the camera around fully. He'd turn it left and right, but only use three sides. We couldn't understand if he knew that the world had four sides, and so we've had to code in little 'tutorial' puzzles that require the use of all four sides.

"It's been a really hard game to figure out. We discovered that the core concept of the game – that you have a rotatable 2D view of a 3D space – was too hard for the player"


Photo: Rebekah Saltsman

Fish (above) is also involved in the Gamma game expo series. The next, themed on one-button games, will run during March's GDC

If it's been hard for players to understand, how hard has it been as a designer?
The simplest concept you can think of in one 2D platform game, we have to think of in four. It's so easy to move something on one side and break your level design completely. But we're committed to the rotation concept, even if something like level design is still super-hard to do, and requires we change tack repeatedly. Our levels used to be really long vertical things, because the levels can't get too horizontal without getting really confusing

In addition to *Fez* (pictured), Polytron is also working on *Power Pill* for iPhone in collaboration with fellow indie developer Infinite Ammo

when you rotate. But while it's fun to climb, it's not fun to go down, so we've been experimenting with levels that loop on themselves, because then you're more content to explore all of a level's sides.

The game is more comfortable now. It's still about the same ideas, but we don't push it so hard. The levels open up, we don't force the player to perform strict tasks; it's really just about exploring a 3D structure from a 2D point of view.

Did you ever play *Nebulus*, an 8bit game designed in the UK in the '80s?
I don't think it ever came out here. When I started developing the game and I showed it to people at work, all the old British guys were like, "That looks like *Nebulus*". I'd never heard of it.

Do you think *Fez* has suffered at all under the weight of expectation?
The IGF 2008 demo was the first half-decent prototype that we had, but we got so much buzz off of it, and that was really premature. Maybe if the game had taken a year it would have been OK, but it's two years later and the hype keeps getting crazier; we've had almost a total media blackout other than releasing a new trailer at GDC, but it still keeps resurfacing. So we've been really careful about what we say to try and manage these expectations. Almost everything about the game is a secret. No one knows really what they're going to get other than the core ideas.

It's a bit of a catch-22, though. If it wasn't for the IGF, we probably wouldn't have gotten so serious about it or received Telefilm support. *Fez* might never have happened.

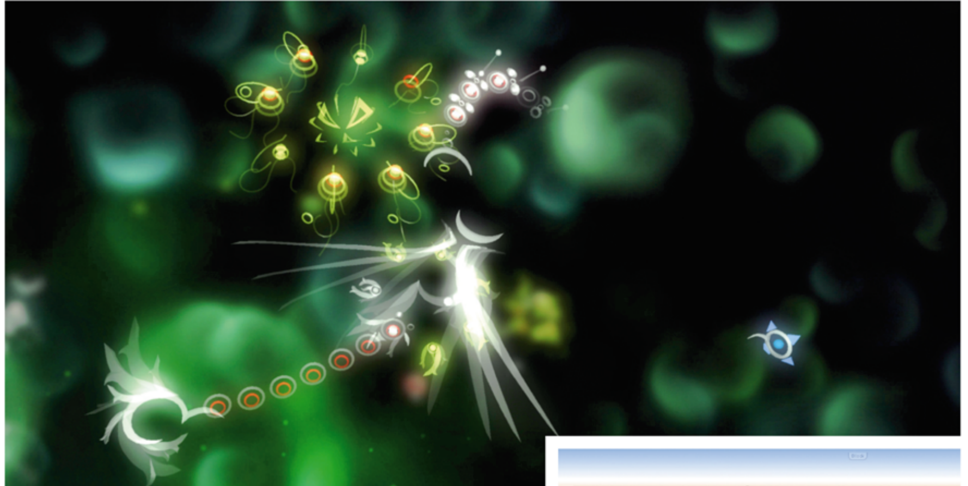
Do you think expectations have increased due to Polyton's strong branding/identity?
If you look at Polytron, outside of *Fez*, it doesn't feel like a game company, and we've always wanted to offer more than 'just' games. We want to do music releases, and we sell T-shirts, not just to make money to produce *Fez*, or to get the name out there, but because we wanted to make a really sweet T-shirt. There's been a lot of careful, deliberate planning on what Polytron is and how we present ourselves.

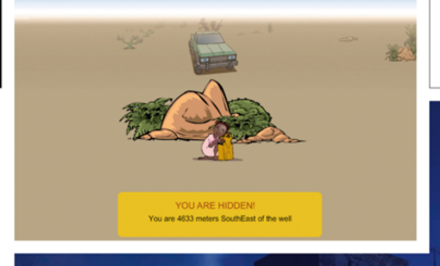
Ultimately, I'm obsessed with aesthetics. Intelligent graphic design is something lacking in videogames. Everyone can make a really convincing barbarian orc, for example, but game menus are always super-ugly and have backwards interfaces. Game design still has a lot to learn from industrial design.



Correction

Amid all of the excitement compiling our 'The Best Of 2000-2009' article in E210, the art department mistakenly included a photograph of Masachika Kawata rather than an image of Shinji Mikami (above). As a producer on the *Resident Evil* series, Kawata is certainly one of our people of the decade, but not *quite* as much as Mikami, so apologies to both for the error.







BOOK

A theory of fun

Tom Chatfield weighs into gaming with a volume that seeks to outline its importance and potential

Fun Inc. is slightly dull, which would merely be ironic if it wasn't so frustrating. Somewhere within Tom Chatfield's short yet wayward book is a pleasant, personal examination of why games matter. Any such focus is lost, however, in a muddled spiral of over-familiar topics, as the author attempts to cover the intricacies of an entire industry without pausing to take a single breath.

Positioned, at least on its covers, as a business text, Fun Inc. is more of a ramble around gaming's history, with perennial hot topics front and centre. Flow (and *Fl0w*) receives an airing, as does emergent design, *America's Army*, MMOGs and the history of MUDs. Finally, just when you're wondering whether Johan Huizinga got stuck in traffic, he's hurried in as a deus ex machina.

Inevitably, Chatfield also spends a good portion of his time trudging over arguments and counter-arguments regarding the perceived social value of games. Most of this is well-trodden stuff, and some is really creaky (in defence of the art form, historical disgust directed at both reading and cinema are wheeled out yet again), reinforcing the sense that this is a collection of favourite after-dinner monologues in search of a proper theme.

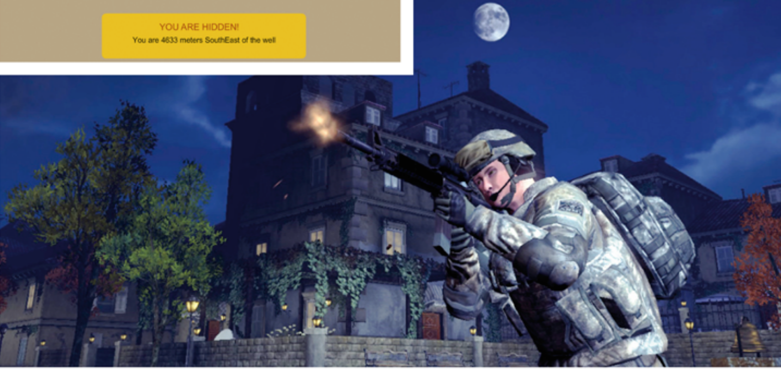
Moments of clarity emerge (the story of a New Yorker who got through the aftermath of 9/11 by playing Diablo II is fascinating) but we never alight on one subject for very long

Both blessing and curse, Chatfield throws thoughts together with a charming breadth of interest – one minute he's discussing avatars, the next minute it's Avatar – but the through-line is victim to his general enthusiasm. Despite his obvious insight, name-checking often stands in for analysis, and floating opposites replace conclusions. Moments of clarity emerge (the story of a New Yorker who got through the aftermath of the September 11 attacks by playing *Diablo II* is both fascinating and troubling) but restlessness means we never alight on one subject for very long: a reading of *Tetris* starts to get rather promising for a few paragraphs, but by then, we're already off on an exploration of the "unfallen and ageless" appeal of virtual spaces.

Equally, given the tiny breathing room he has to explore such an unwieldy topic, you could question some of Chatfield's content choices. A book about games in which Jason Rohrer warrants two mentions but Shigeru Miyamoto doesn't even get a look-in suggests critical faculties might be in need of recalibration, while repeated references to 'PlayStation III' indicates the author has hardware modded by Emperor Constantine and no access to Wikipedia.

Having cast himself in the terminally unsatisfying role of usher, it's only when Chatfield breaks free that Fun Inc. begins to find its feet. Later sections tackle the economics of virtual worlds in the welcome company of Wired writer Julian Dibbell and MMOG expert Nick Yee, allowing for an excellent delineation of the contradictory relationship between work and play, while an oddly dated chapter on serious games gets Chatfield to close in on his subject for a few pages and begin exploring his own experiences, often with genuinely interesting outcomes.

As if posing an intertextual puzzle based around one of the industry's most contemporary problems, the failings with Fun Inc. ultimately come down to an argument any forumite could appreciate: is it intended for the casual, or the hardcore? Chatfield never quite finds his answer; moments of close detailing are too sparse, while the regular speed and distance of the journey blurs most of what's left. In writing about everything, Fun Inc. has risked covering almost nothing. As an overview of the landscape it's too often pedestrian, and as a sustained examination of any particular theme it has insight, but lacks patience.



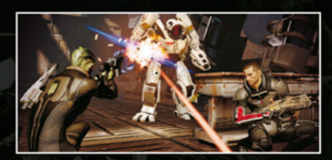
The arts and books editor for Prospect magazine, Chatfield is game-literate enough to discuss interesting titles such as *Fl0w* (top), *Darfur Is Dying* (centre) and *America's Army* (above). There's a sense of woolliness in terms of the book's intended audience throughout, however

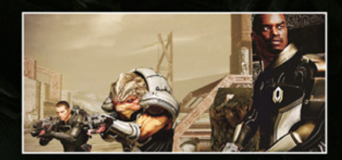


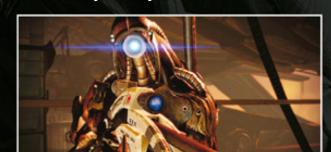


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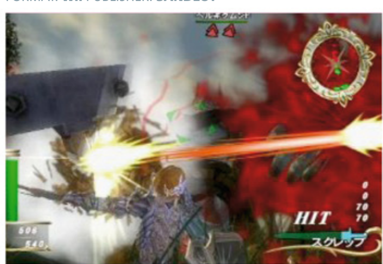


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INCOMING

Zangeki No Reginleiv

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **SANDLOT**



EDF assemble! What Sandlot did next is out February in Japan, and published by Nintendo. Fourplayer co-op, limb lopping and weapon customisation – we like all of these things, right?

Super Yum Yum Puzzle Adventures

FORMAT: **DSIWARE** PUBLISHER: **MASTERTRONIC**



AirPlay's ever-hungry chameleon makes the transition from iPhone to DSi in order to digest 48 more levels of brainteasers. Expect bright colours and some obnoxious difficulty spikes

Etrian Odyssey III

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**



Atlus' faintly intimidating dungeon hack heads to the seaside. Class changes, pirates, and ocean floors ripe for mapping have all been promised. But will we have to annotate our own maps?

Shiren The Wanderer Wii

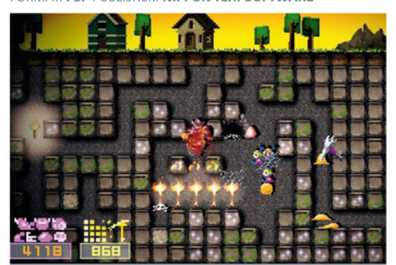
FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**



Chunsoft's *Rogue*-like prepares to explore its most terrifying dungeon yet: the thirdparty Wii software marketplace. New 3D graphics and a Dragon Orb attribute system are the main lures

Holy Invasion Of Privacy Badman! 2

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **NIPPON-ICHI SOFTWARE**



The sequel to Acquire's downloadable PSP mining oddity sees a release on UMD as well as PSN. To sweeten the deal, the first game comes as a generous extra whichever format you choose

DC Universe Online

FORMAT: **PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCEA**



From the MMO in which the NPC roster is the main feature, the slow trickle of information hardens into an icicle, as SOE Austin announces the inclusion of perennial B-lister Mr Freeze

Ghostwire

FORMAT: **DSIWARE** PUBLISHER: **MAJESCO**



DSi goes PKE with a collection game that superimposes ghosts on anything you point the camera at. The spirit realm's a fitting match for the wobbly contrivances of augmented reality

Star Trek Online

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **ATARI**



Cryptic stocks up on Spocks old and new, with Zachary Quinto and Leonard Nimoy signing on for voice duties. Whether this is down to temporal vortices or marketing is anybody's guess

Alan Wake

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MGS**



Remedy prepares to rouse its hero from his dev nightmare as a mid-year release looms. The chiaroscuro gameplay remains an unknown quantity, but the tweed physics are very well realised



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Blosics

www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/521309

"No more lessons," announces *Blosics*, three pages into its brief tutorial. "It is time to meet your destiny!" The exclamation point might be over-egging things somewhat, since destiny in this case appears to involve flinging billiard balls at matchstick structures until you've comprehensively knocked them to pieces. At least it doesn't involve elves.

Blosics may look like educational software, but there's an undeniable pleasure to be found in stretching your shiny black projectile back before letting it whiz into the distance, and the sleepy physics engine is perfectly tuned for sending precarious structures yawning towards the ground or sluggishly blasting into fragments. By the time *Blosics* is throwing in different platform types, ranging from ice to rubber, as well as blocks that have to be avoided rather than destroyed, an amiably empirical time-waster is unfolding inside your browser.

It's hard to fault design when it's this basic and satisfying, and beneath the bland exterior lurks a game that revels in mindless destruction – and, sometimes, that's enough.


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Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

The non-stop gaming year ahead

Piers Harding-Rolls looks forward to a packed 2010





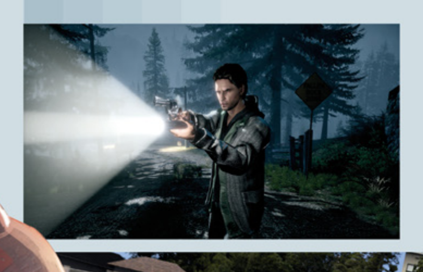
BioShock 2 **(top) is due in February, while *Dark Void* (centre) and *Darksiders* (both reviewed this issue) are out now**

As we move into a new year, it's becoming clear that 2010 will play host to the release of a mountain of console content driven by delays to major titles and the introduction of new console technology.

First up is the extended Christmas release season, a result of the decision by many publishers to add 'more polish' to major titles that were meant to hit the market at the end of 2009 and have been subsequently delayed to the first half of this year. Primarily, it's a phenomenon driven by publishers hoping to avoid a direct sales battle with *Modern Warfare 2* and sidestep the increasingly risky Q4 Christmas release congestion.

Heading into the final quarters of both 2007 and 2008, Screen Digest highlighted that there were hundreds of new console titles hitting the market over the Christmas quarter, resulting in a hyper-competitive market that not only affected the sales of games based on new IPs, but also those of established franchises that were expected to sell at a high level. This situation was forecast to be exacerbated in 2009 due to the economic climate, so a number of publishers made the early decision to delay the launch of some major titles and give Activision Blizzard free rein with its 500lb gorilla.

A number of publishers made the early decision to delay the launch of some major titles and give Activision Blizzard free rein with its 500lb gorilla – Modern Warfare 2



As such, the first few months of 2010 will see the release of a tidy collection of major titles, dramatically changing the normally quiet start to the year that we're used to experiencing in the console sector. By now, many gamers will already



The long-in-the-works *Gran Turismo 5* will make its debut in Japan in March, with a worldwide release later in the year. *Alan Wake* (above) is due in May







Highlights for early 2010 include ***Bayonetta***, Quantic Dream's ***Heavy Rain*** (left – see p28) and Square Enix's ***Final Fantasy XIII*** (below left)

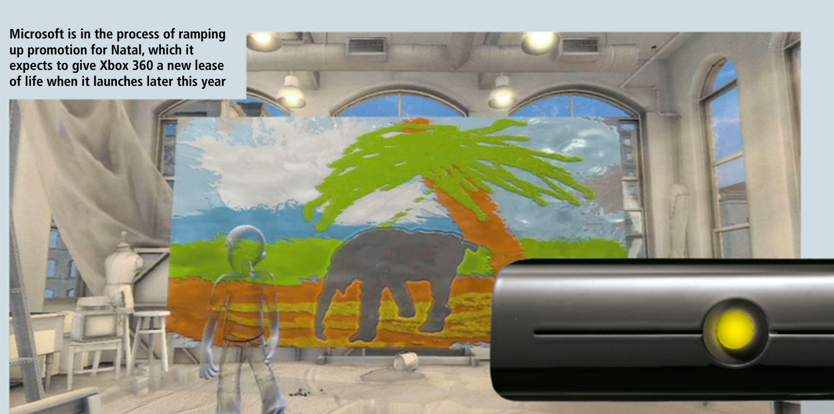


have their hands on PlatinumGames' *Bayonetta*, and the big titles don't end there – *Darksiders*, *Dark Void*, *Mass Effect 2*, *BioShock 2*, *Dante's Inferno*, *Splinter Cell Conviction*, *God Of War III*, *Gran Turismo 5*, *Dead Rising 2*, *Alan Wake*, *Heavy Rain*, *Sin And Punishment 2*, *Red Steel 2*, *Final Fantasy XIII* – the list goes on.

This unprecedented start to the year in terms of quality content for gamers suggests that 2010 could well be the high point for this generation of packaged console content. The timetable of launches also leads us nicely into the first major technological update of the year in the form of Sony's as-yet-unbranded motion-tracking camera and controller peripherals, which are expected to hit the market in the spring. Codenamed Gem, Sony's motion-tracking solution will open up a new competitive front for the HD PlayStation consoles, with Microsoft's Natal hardware following suit towards the end of the year. The launch of the technology will also be accompanied by a collection of brand new firstparty content utilising the features – yet more titles contending for gamers' entertainment dollar.

While we may see a games release lull during the summer months, it won't be long before players are treated to another collection of titles built to take advantage of Microsoft's Natal technology. The gusto with which Microsoft has recruited support for Natal reflects the important role the technology will have in extending the life of the Xbox 360 over the next three years. In this respect, the success of Natal is as important to publishers as it is to Microsoft, as they're seeking to squeeze as much revenue as possible out of their existing development investments rather than having to start afresh once more with new console technology. Judging by the amount of third parties that Microsoft has been courting, we expect there to be a substantial number of games purpose-built for Natal ready to hit the market at its launch. All in all, then, 2010 looks set to be a non-stop content extravaganza for gamers worldwide.

Microsoft is in the process of ramping up promotion for Natal, which it expects to give Xbox 360 a new lease of life when it launches later this year

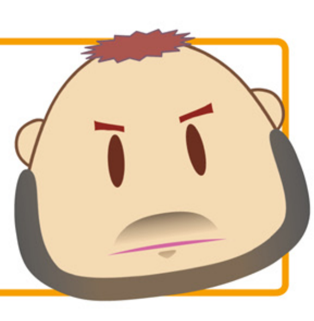


SOMETHING ABOUT Japan



Personality bytes

Brick Bardo wonders how many roles make up one good character



Anyone heard of Raizo Ichikawa? If you're not a Japanese movie maniac, you won't have. Born in 1931, many thought he was destined for kabuki, the revered dance drama, but he wasn't: the world of cinema called. Over 15 years, Ichikawa acted in 159 movies, before dying of cancer in 1969 at the young age of 37.

Because of his background in kabuki, most of his appearances were in 'Jidaigeki' movies (which is basically the samurai genre). Despite this typecasting, Ichikawa's talent found expression in the variety of roles these settings could offer: a cheerful feudal lord, a forbidding samurai, a sneaky master swordsman, a sinister ninja, and many more. He could bring a touch of comedy to a crowd scene as easily as playing a cool lover or a repulsive anti-hero.

It was recently the 40th anniversary of Raizo Ichikawa's death, and across Japan the cinemas – especially the smaller ones – showed his movies to celebrate. More than 100 of his films were advertised for December showings. As a big fan of his work, I hoped to go to at least ten of them, and I invited along a friend of mine who's the editor-in-chief of a publisher that specialises in books written about the movie industry.

He said something about Ichikawa that I was a little suspicious of at first. "Listen up, Brick! Raizo Ichikawa is unusual! He's an actor that is loved from one generation to the next!" Oh, indeed? Any country has one or two actors that are well-known and popular symbols, but the ones that retain this popularity over time are unusual. Even then they grow old with their own generation, and most of the time end up as has-beens. But in Ichikawa's case, even after 40 years have passed, people come to his movies. When a book is published about him, it's reviewed in the papers and talked about, selling lots of copies. Weirdest of all, a new generation of female fans has turned him into a sex symbol.

Of course, this isn't about a sudden explosion of popularity but a build-up over time, and that's what's rare. For example, Toshiro Mifune is well known in the west, and his name is prominent in Japan too. But that type of fame isn't the same: Japanese people won't go to his old movies in theatres, or buy so many books about him. And I haven't heard about any increase in new female Mifune fans.

Would it be so strange to see that red hat and those blue dungarees in a more mature game? What about Snake from MGS playing a part in a romance story? I think we're getting closer to a time when such moves will be made

So why does the reputation of someone like Ichikawa grow instead of fading? Obviously, a big part is that he died young, never growing old in the imagination or reality. Indeed, he's often been called the James Dean of Japanese cinema. He was charismatic and a great actor, but I don't think any of these things on their own can explain something like the Dai Raizo-Sai (Big Raizo Festival). Incidentally, if you're interested in checking out his work, I recommend the Shinobi No Mono ('Sleepy Eyes Of Death') series, easily available in the west. The only aspect of Ichikawa you'll miss out on there is his comedy and charm.

So why the hell am I writing about this in **Edge**? Because I've been wondering for most of my career whether a similar kind of popularity could be created around a videogame character. What about Mario? His name jumps to mind because the character has broken the boundaries set in his initial appearances to embrace various

genres. His huge popularity has never wavered. Of course, you might say he's just being Mario and nothing more, which is nothing like an actor. But Mario doesn't need to assume things: as a digital character, nothing is impossible, and he can simply become whatever Nintendo needs. A referee, a kart driver, a chef, an athlete, Super Mario or Dr Mario – it's easy.

But are we missing something? Would it be so strange, for example, to see that red hat and those blue dungarees in a more mature game? What about Snake from *MGS* playing a part in a straightforward romance story? Yes, both seem impossible projects, and fans of the characters may not react well initially. However, I think we're getting closer to a time when such moves, perhaps with baby steps at first, will be made.

Imagine you have a game that is a hit. The sequel is greenlit, and you decide to use the character differently, to give them a different image. There's the possibility it will be a disaster, but the right publisher and developer could make it work. All of a sudden that character is an icon – you know the fans will buy the next game just because that character is in it, just like a Johnny Depp or Brad Pitt. It might even be possible to have such a character guesting in movies.

But a virtual star doesn't feel time or die. And that leads to other things. Let's look at a recent example: Date Kyoko DK-96, the first virtual idol. Maybe you've already heard of her. She first appeared in 1996, with a fabricated backstory and an assortment of cheesy J-pop tunes, and it all ended up as a big commercial failure. I understood what her makers were trying to do: create the perfect virtual star, as comfortable singing as acting, always available and always cheerful. And always predictable. The fact is that Date Kyoko was born a star without an audience; an actor does not become a global superstar with their debut performance, they build a successful career with many roles. Date Kyoko's creators said: "Here, we made a virtual idol. Let's give her a leading role. Please, everybody come and support her". It just doesn't work like that.

Depp, Pitt and Ichikawa did not meet success with their first jobs. So, I think this gives us a lesson about how to look at the development of our characters, and make them evolve over time. Such projects have already been spoken of and current technology certainly makes them possible. Until the breakout success, though, we'll have to just wait – but afterwards we can tell everyone we saw it coming.


New Super Mario Bros Wii


Zelda: Spirit Tracks

Mediacreate Japanese sales: December 21-27

Game/monthly sales

1. ***New Super Mario Brothers Wii*** (Nintendo, Wii): 506,453
2. ***The Legend Of Zelda: Spirit Tracks*** (Nintendo, DS): 291,496
3. ***Tomodachi Collection*** (Nintendo, DS): 226,920
4. ***Final Fantasy XIII*** (Square Enix, PS3): 188,511
5. ***Pokémon Heart Gold/Soul Silver*** (Pokémon Company, DS): 124,704
6. ***Wii Fit Plus*** (Nintendo, Wii): 113,909
7. ***Inazuma Eleven 2*** (Level-5, DS): 99,175
8. ***Wii Sports Resort*** (Nintendo, Wii): 72,355
9. ***Taiko No Tatsujin Wii 2*** (BNG, Wii): 63,845
10. ***Layton Majin No Fue*** (Level-5, DS): 63,549

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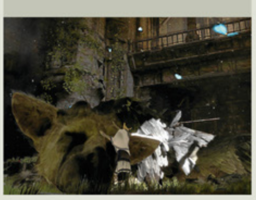


Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

The Last Guardian



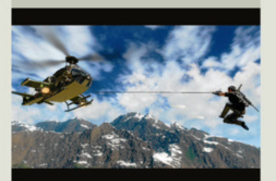
Every time we see a cat, we imagine it being 50 times bigger and flying us away to a world where we'll work together and be the best of friends. Every time…
PS3, SCE

The Outsider



Repeat viewings of The Parallax View have left us itching to explore Washington. Hopefully, David Braben's latest will break cover this year – it's a long time since E165.
TBC, TBC

Just Cause 2



We're quietly pleased that Rico's found time for a haircut amidst all the geopolitics, and openly excited about dual-ended grapples and PS3's YouTube link-up facility.
PS3, 360, PC, EIDOS

What's in a frame?

Do games set within a wider context risk coming unstuck?



Ruse owes as much to tabletop war games as real battlefields, and acknowledging this through an in-game visual trick gives the player a foundation for understanding its mechanics

You're reading a magazine. It was produced by a team using Adobe InDesign and shiny Apple Macs over a period of four weeks, with some late nights and caffeine thrown in. That's a framing device. Do you feel the same way about **Edge** now?

Several of this month's games mount their offering within a larger idea. *Split Second* is the simplest: the lacquer of reality TV provides a charismatic collage of multi-screen menus and, rather more helpfully, an easy means of explaining exploding racetracks. It renders plausible a world in which souped-up muscle cars hammer past an airport's crumbling control tower.

With *Ruse*, things are a little more playful. Pulling the camera back to its limits reveals that the game takes place on a table in a room that exists beyond the battlefield. A charming aesthetic choice, perhaps, but it's also a gentle clue for getting your head around a game that only truly makes sense if you understand the genres it's blending. *Ruse*'s retreat to the physical world is a grinning nod to its own artifice.

Artifice has its pitfalls, however. *Kane & Lynch* takes the idea of framing the furthest, with an elaborate aesthetic that borrows the iconography of YouTube to brilliantly pin down just what shape 'reality' takes nowadays, whether it's the Twin Towers collapsing or a restaurant scuffle. It's a creepy marvel to watch, as IO perfectly captures the dirty bloom of strip-lighting viewed through a camcorder, while jump-cutting, frame-buffering timers and the muffled audioscape work uneasy magic. But such a presentation also shines an uncomfortable light on how far these things go with an interactive experience: standard cover mechanics can look brutally contrived under such conditions, while the naturalistic bobbing of the camera exposes the Muppet-like character model of Lynch.

Framing devices are like a secret handshake. By letting you into the secret that's not a secret – the artificiality of what you're playing – a game can either be sharing a joke or loudly butting the fourth wall. But the more a game's identity depends on exposing structural contrivances, the more obvious its other boundaries. As the player's eyes are widened, so is the chance they'll see all the things you don't want them to.

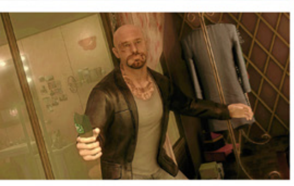
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 26**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E193, E204, E207**

Heavy Rain

How far are you prepared to go to do up someone's tie?

A tilt of the analogue stick lays a plate on a dinner table. Too fast and the plate clinks, evoking the ire of the nearby wife. Submit to her stern glare with a soft prod and the plate is prissily eased into place. Under your thumb, under her thumb: one and the same. A little later, the same motion slides a frying pan off an in-store rack, readying a detective to bludgeon some justice into a convenience store robber. What strikes you is not the range of actions available through *Heavy Rain*'s context-sensitive controls but their strange mix: mundane to murderous in the flick of a stick.

If *Heavy Rain* is Quantic Dream founder David Cage bridging the gap between videogame and movie, we have to ask: just what movie is he guiding us towards? In 11 successive chapters, Cage as 'filmmaker' is as prone to schizophrenic outbursts as his characters (doting father Ethan Mars suffers similar blackouts to *Fahrenheit*'s Lucas Kane). Mars' table-laying domestic scenes capture those ponderous routines so loved by Sam Mendes: the perfect homes of American Beauty and Road To Perdition, waiting to be shattered. But come the shattering, we are suddenly in the hands of a leering Brian De Palma, ratcheting up the tension with gleeful red herrings. Later, a police procedural revels in ghoulish details of the crime scene – alas, more CSI than Seven – before Cage flicks back to De Palma for some schlocky naked lady action (see 'Navel gazing'). Interactive movie is one thing. Who knew Cage meant *all* movies?





Cage has promised that there will be no supernatural elements this time, the plot's hunt for a serial killer hopefully less daft than *Fahrenheit*'s sentient internets and magical prophesies



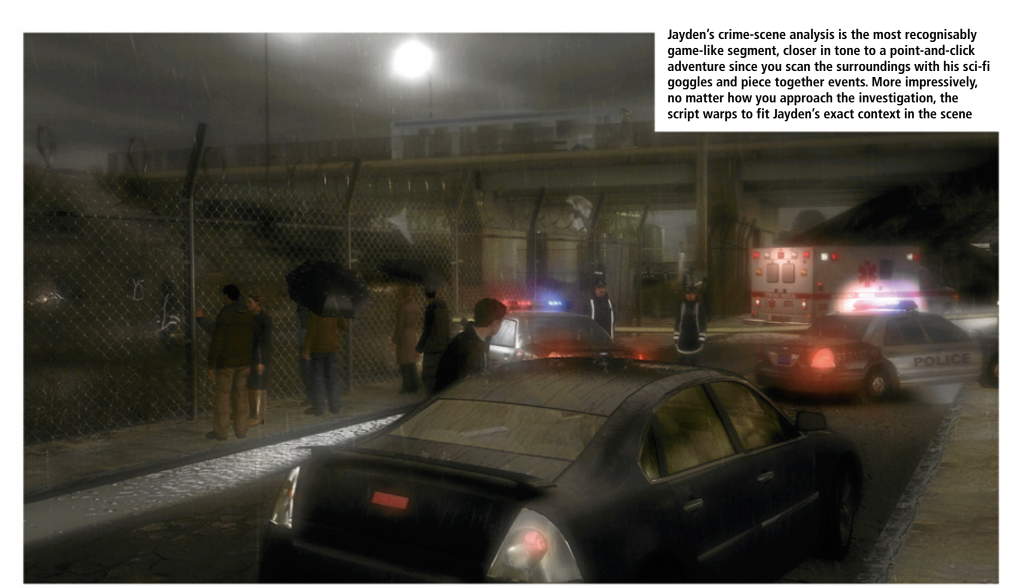
Mars' table-laying domestic scenes capture those ponderous routines so loved by Sam Mendes before Cage flicks to De Palma for some naked lady action

Perhaps the tone converges as the four character strands grow intertwined. For now, Cage's homage grab-bag does at least show off the mechanical potential. Mars' home best demonstrates interactive sets. Orange juice is glugged, teeth brushed, balls juggled and windows winsomely stared out of. There are enough prompts to help mask how much of his Ikea catalogue home is out of bounds, and the sudden arrival of Mrs Mars and her chores put a natural time cap on any illusion-shattering exploration. Later scenes, however, seem sparse in comparison. Purchasing an asthma inhaler, for example, puts private eye Scott Shelby among shelves and shelves of props and trinkets, searching for a single interaction sign, quivering in some darkened corner. For a PI, Shelby shows little inquisitiveness. We'd be all over those finely rendered apples.

And while button prompts and stick waggles are fundamentally too abstract to accurately simulate opening a fridge, *Heavy Rain* does find a more elegant replacement for *Fahrenheit*'s *Track & Field*-style button mashing. Awkward acts of concentration – finding footholds in an embankment, for example – chain button cues, requiring you to hold two simultaneously while searching for the next with a spare finger. It is easy to slip up and, in the process, slip up. Struggling with drug-withdrawal symptoms, FBI profiler Norman Jayden clasps his shaking hand as you too grasp claw-like at the face buttons. Compare this to Carla's controlled breathing exercises in *Fahrenheit* and it is clear Cage has learnt his lessons. In terms of narrative control, interactions allowing fast or slow actions trump all. In a game of largely binary decisions – should you interact or not? – only these alter the outcome within the moment. Choosing to ease your sleepy boy's bedroom door closed is a sweet moment.

At the other end of the scale are QTEs, where doors are not gently shut but slammed rigorously into thugs and quite often smashed through (Cage has a taste for

Jayden's crime-scene analysis is the most recognisably game-like segment, closer in tone to a point-and-click adventure since you scan the surroundings with his sci-fi goggles and piece together events. More impressively, no matter how you approach the investigation, the script warps to fit Jayden's exact context in the scene





Ethan Mars' time with his son allows for *Heavy Rain*'s most resonant, tender moments. Coaxing the boy out of his shell with boomerang lobs and seesaw rides is surprisingly affecting, a rare moment of respite amongst the bleakness



The shopping-mall disappearance of Mars' son triggers a panicked dash, all woozy camera angles against a sea of uncaring shopper faces. Keeping an eye on the boy's red balloon is a bit Don't Look Now – the question is, which red balloon to follow?



Scott Shelby (above) is most prone to fail. Investigating the Origami Killer, his interviews with previous victims rely on deft conversational manipulation. Push too hard and it's all too easy to come away with nothing



Navel gazing

***Fahrenheit*'s detractors called it out for its sleazy ogling of the female form. Two minutes into Madison Paige's debut episode and she's in the shower for a drawn-out scrub. Of course, the camera is only there to capture the – admittedly lovely – water droplets rolling down her – admitted lovely – stomach, but it seems ungentlemanly to stare at a lady's motion-captured chest before we've even caught her name. Of the two Madison scenes revealed so far (this and the infamous nightclub striptease), she ends up naked in both. In the light of *Heavy Rain*'s tender moments, the association of 'mature gaming' with swearing and nudity seems cruder than usual.**

characters being hurled through scenery that verges on parody). It is not that the QTEs don't work – in fact, the potential variety and sheer number of cues keep them fast and frothy. The problem is, in a game celebrating decision-making and choice, abstract cues represent the unknowable. When Shelby spots a potential weapon mid-brawl, what will happen if we hammer the X button as requested? Will it kill the thug? Will Shelby reach for it and receive a blow to the ribs? This moment is more important than choosing to drink a cup of coffee – so why do we have more control over the latter?

Cage has repeatedly mentioned the difficulty of talking about *Heavy Rain*. Arguably, this is more a symptom of its sweeping inconsistencies than some inexplicable vision. One lost boy is physically pursued through a heaving shopping mall throng; another's vanishing is relegated to cutscenes. Doing up your boss's tie is a finger-twisting exercise; dressing yourself is an analogue stick nudge away. Mars' motivations are gradually introduced over three chapters; Shelby appears mid-investigation with no backstory with which to judge how to proceed. Attention to detail sits uneasily alongside broad strokes.

But there is always the promise of minor details becoming broad strokes, revealing their relevance as later chapters unfold. A game built upon consequences cannot be judged on the initial actions. In our three hours of play, only Shelby so far bears the scars of his decisions, but what is a grazed lip when Cage's promise of death looms in the background? Have we witnessed plot exposition or plot formation? *Heavy Rain* shifts, lurches, falters and occasionally amazes – but it near refuses to be played in anything but its entirety.



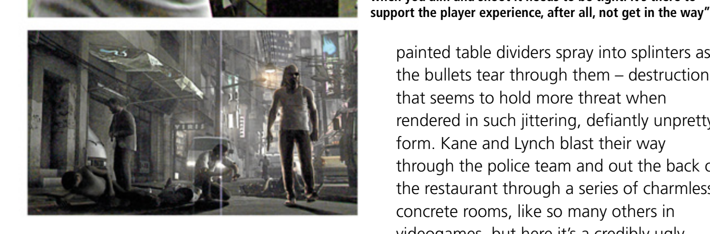
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
RELEASE: **2010**

Kane & Lynch: Dog Days

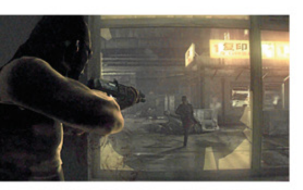
The terrible two turn up in Shanghai in search of eastern promise and cheap cameras







We ask if the blurring, jerking movements become distracting. "When you have a crucial need for gameplay feedback, we have to be solid," says Lund. "We have this shaky cam, but when you aim and shoot it needs to be tight. It's there to support the player experience, after all, not get in the way"







Lynch spent a fair amount of the first game bouncing back and forth between borderline insanity and full-scale hallucinatory psychosis. Obviously, with the player now in his shoes, this could well prove to be a little irritating. Not so, says Lund: "We toned down a lot of the more psycho thingamajigs and stuff from the first game, because we wanted to have an experience of believability"

What looks real? While other developers have been throwing higher texture resolutions at the question, IO Interactive has turned to a different source for an answer: YouTube. From happy-slapping to documenting political oppression, the prevalence of cheap digital video and the means to easily share it has turned amateur footage into a new form of cinéma vérité. Hollywood has followed quickly with films like The Blair Witch Project, Cloverfield and Paranormal Activity. But though it's taken this long for games to catch up, IO Interactive's sequel to the violent crime drama *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* so immediately captures a sense of YouTube's handheld authenticity that you sense it won't be alone for long.

Bigfoot hoaxers throughout history have already proven the benefits: bleary, grainy footage covers errors, leaves more to the imagination and insinuates a human presence in the scene with which the audience can't help but identify. So it is with *Kane & Lynch: Dog Days*, our demonstration opening with the titular duo chowing down in a restaurant – a cutscene depicted with unsteady movement, digital artefacts and strobing, washed-out fluorescent lights. The criminals for hire have gone to ground in Shanghai, having been run out of every other bolt hole. The psychotic Lynch, who now takes over as the playable character, has formed something of a life here – a girlfriend and a job as an enforcer. Things don't stay that way for long, though. Indeed, it's not long before everyone seems to want Lynch and his partner dead, as we soon witness: armed police blast into the restaurant, forcing the two to gun their way out.

Switching from cutscene to over-the-shoulder thirdperson, the camera fizzes with artefacts as the bullets fly, fragmenting into pixels when one skims too close to Lynch. The fight is chaotic and vicious. The red-painted table dividers spray into splinters as the bullets tear through them – destruction that seems to hold more threat when rendered in such jittering, defiantly unpretty form. Kane and Lynch blast their way through the police team and out the back of the restaurant through a series of charmless concrete rooms, like so many others in videogames, but here it's a credibly ugly setting rather than a sign of failing imaginations among the dev team. And then it's out on to the streets, illuminated in stark pools by the fluorescent tubes of shops and stalls while the city towers above, a disorienting potpourri of old and new, dilapidation and hi-tech.

This staggering urban diversity is the attraction of Shanghai as a setting, says game director **Karsten Lund**. "Some of it's science-fiction, some of it's medieval," he explains. "You have Warsaw-like rubble piles next to busy urban developments; charcoal tea-kitchens, iPods and electric bicycles all in





The footage shown reminds us of director Michael Mann's developing predilection for digital film. With *Dead Men*'s comparisons to Heat, we ask about his significance to *Dog Days*' camera work. "I think we took it further," says Lund. "Mann is very stylised in his use of digital video. We've gone all the way out into the user-generated thing"



While talking about the intersection of realism, violence and videogames, we ask whether Lund feels there are limits to what can be comfortably depicted. "Sure there are," he says, "and we're probably close to them this time. But great drama is all about life and death, and stuff that's important to you"

the same place. One of the biggest issues they have in skyscrapers are bonfires on the balconies, because people make tea over charcoal. I don't even know how many skyscrapers they build a week. It's like being in a contemporary version of Blade Runner."

For Kane and Lynch, Shanghai is a place to hide – a haystack to their needle. In the demonstration, pedestrians and cars – in numbers befitting one of the world's largest metropolitan sprawls – react with due terror to the protagonists as they take on another police squad in the street.

> Switching from cutscene to over-the-shoulder thirdperson, the camera fizzes with artefacts as the bullets fly, and fragments into pixels when one skims too close to Lynch

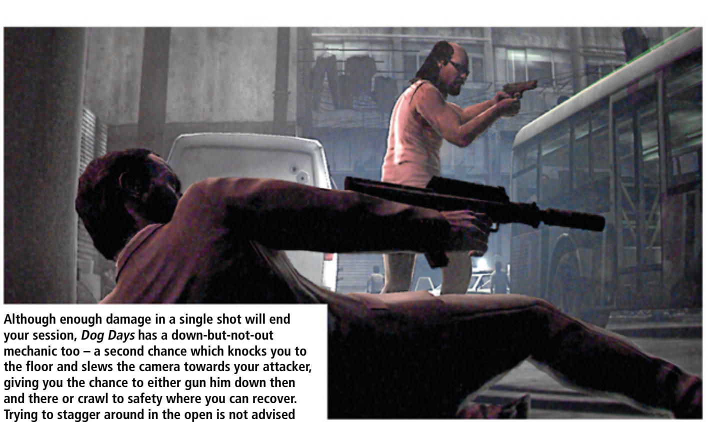
"Whenever you shoot, all the audio is turned down," says Lund. "It's trying to compress the sound because it's too loud, like it would on a cheap video camera, and then the volume comes back up."

Lynch shelters for a moment in a quickly decimated record store, before an almighty explosion guts the shop across the intersection, allowing the pair to pelt off, through some alleys and then out into the dark expanse of a construction site. The sense of physical danger and violence is potent, even if our demonstration gives little idea of the variety the game will involve – or indeed the quality of execution, which was the truly major sticking point of the previous game. Nonetheless, we wonder if IO anticipates controversy by casting its bloodshed in such visceral, credible form.

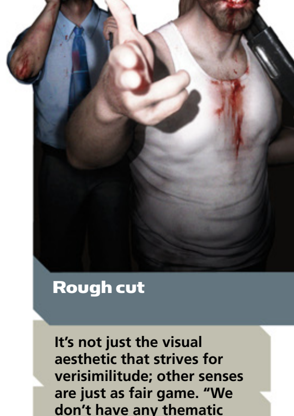
"I'm not sure what to expect," says Lund. "I think the *Kane & Lynch* brand needs to be a little on the edge of what you can do. If it parts the waters I hope it parts enough people to our benefit. I don't think we're in the business of trying to shock people, though – we're not being controversial for the sake of it."

Well, you do wonder – what with an ad campaign for the previous game getting pulled by the UK's Advertising Standards Agency due to the level of offence it caused. Not to mention the unseemliness of the two protagonists and their actions, which was a bugbear mentioned in many reviews: it's one thing to have a character committing violence against an unarmed woman on film – the viewer need not be complicit – but it's another thing to ask you to walk around in that man's skin afterwards. It poses an intriguing dilemma: do anti-heroes in games present a special challenge, since they ask players to embody and not just observe?

"You need to strike that balance," says Lund. "We're trying to portray the bad guy, but in playing that character you realise that they have motivations and driving forces like the good guys. Lynch has got a girlfriend, so he's got something to lose now and reason to do what he's doing. That should make sense to everybody. It's just that the way they solve their problems is usually the wrong way – and the game is about dealing with that consequence, exploring that point of no return. Everybody can turn criminal, they just need to be pushed over that boundary. And it's not really about good or bad in the end, it's about trying to play somebody other than your usual special elite tactical forces, or space marines, or assassins. It's time for something else."



Although enough damage in a single shot will end your session, *Dog Days* has a down-but-not-out mechanic too – a second chance which knocks you to the floor and slews the camera towards your attacker, giving you the chance to either gun him down then and there or crawl to safety where you can recover. Trying to stagger around in the open is not advised



Rough cut

It's not just the visual aesthetic that strives for verisimilitude; other senses are just as fair game. "We don't have any thematic music playing in the game at all," says Lund. "The only music we have are 25 Chinese pop songs, especially composed for us, that will be playing from various sources in the game. And then we'll have ambient tracks, which are sort of musical, consisting of recordings of the cityscape. There aren't any violins playing when something sad happens to you in real life – I hate it when you are told how to feel in that way in a game. This is your experience – we'll emphasise the tones but we're not playing the full orchestra."

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **EUGEN SYSTEMS**
ORIGIN: **2010**
RELEASE: **SPRING**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E196, E204**

Ruse

Just another WWII RTS? Not quite. As the multiplayer beta demonstrates, Ubisoft has a cunning plan







The map is divided up into sectors within which your ruses take effect. Pan right out and you can see an animated overlay indicating their effect and duration. This is one of the few slightly awkward conceits – certainly there needs to be some way of limiting the ruses, but the boundaries feel a little contrived



The construction of buildings and units is controlled from a single menu. It's accessible and readable. A little more iconic distinction between buildings would be useful in both the menu and the field, though

Failure to read the FAQ wouldn't have impressed our court martial; had we been actual generals fighting an *actual* war, we'd almost certainly have been facing the firing squad for the catastrophic way our first three battles played out. *Ruse*, a war game in which deception plays as large a part as bullets, inevitably has a few twists that are tricky to perceive at a casual glance, but the main adjustment it requires is one of scale. Panning up, the camera moves seamlessly from a French town square, with its fountains and hanging baskets, to a view of the entire town – and then upwards still, until the town is a greyish bur in a patchwork of fields, trees, rolling mountains and shimmering waters. This too diminishes as you pull back, transforming from a living vista as you finally find yourself staring at a model landscape in an operations room.

As wowing as this is, *Ruse*'s dynamic level of detail has great significance. With such distances involved, units take a long time to reach their destinations and an assault might be anticipated by the enemy for a good minute or three before it's trundled across the pastures of rural France and into range. There's no fog of war here: each army can see the movements of the other, although descriptions of individual units are limited until you get an eyeball on them. Play therefore becomes more strategic: understanding which pieces you'll set in motion, in what direction, and when they'll arrive takes over from the minutiae of individual engagements.

But while there's very little need to micromanage units, their overall placement is vital. Infantry will do you little good against an armoured push in open ground, but spring unexpectedly from a treeline or engage them in the rubble of a town and they can blow the tracks off almost anything. Line of sight affects how your units operate,



Hovering over an enemy will pop up an indicator of your selected units' chances against it, although we're not quite sure whether this takes into account the immediate geography, which, due to the time taken to travel, may not be where you end up engaging them. Also: anti-tank defences don't live up to their name

Although we played on PC, the drop-down build interface is easily adaptable to console. We're not keen on the way that the menu closes every time a building's been selected – it isn't so obtrusive that it covers your placement area, and you often want to lay down more than one anti-tank dugout

but it's not always apparent whether geography will get in the way when you're panned out to the strategic level – necessitating the occasional dip closer to ground. Nonetheless, being able to swoop the camera over haystacks and picket fences as a Panzer rumbles through a nearby orchard is probably an unnecessary, albeit perfectly welcome, distraction.

But despite the grander strategic level on which the game operates, *Ruse* is far from slothful in its pace. Rather than the rapid-fire clicks and rehearsed responses of other RTS games, you're observing and reacting to the other player, zipping across the map in the hopes of clocking his plans in time to assemble a decent defence against them. Since each player starts with extremely limited resources, you can only build so many things, giving you both the spare time and a vital need for reconnaissance to ensure that your efforts are well directed; AA guns won't do you much good if the enemy is churning out a battalion of tanks.

As the game progresses, the player builds more supply depots on top of the yellow resource markers that are dotted around each map. The spacing and road configuration between them is important: trucks roll back and forth between these depots and your headquarters, each contributing to your coffers, but only at the rate the journey length permits. Trucks can be intercepted and destroyed, too, enabling the enemy to throttle your expansion by cutting off the roadways to your depots.

Fortunately, tools of deception are at your disposal, enabling you to mask the movements of vehicles within one of the map's several sectors. Alternatively, you might send a decoy army to menace your opponent while making essential manoeuvres elsewhere, or plant a decoy building to distract them. There are a total of ten such abilities, the ruses of the title, which are earned at a host-defined rate over the course of the game. Some conceal your own units, bases and movements, others reveal the opposing player's, drawing out their last orders in big red arrows. Another group grant abilities to units in that sector – doubling their speed, making them less likely to flee battle, or more likely to rout their opponents. The interplay of intelligence and counter-intelligence has never been described so elegantly in an RTS, and the game is balanced so that their combination leads to rich strategic possibility, but their supply and area of effect is limited so as not to overwhelm the player or the other mechanics of the game.

There's still fine-tuning to be done during the beta – one thing we discovered from our spate of early drubbings is that it's quite possible to find yourself in a hopeless position with a good ten minutes to spare, and while we can't excuse the incompetence of our command, more options to dig yourself out of trouble might make for longer, more dynamic matches. As it is, the game is suited to short ten or 20 minute rounds – but then, we're yet to see the full roster of maps. Perhaps some of them will encourage you to stick around long enough to make use of the high-end technologies you can research during the game. In either case, *Ruse's* central premise of deception is a near certain success – the fog of war now feels like a rather cheap trick in the context of the game's options for espionage and misdirection. Fighting them on the beaches and the landing grounds is all very well, but as *Ruse* has quickly taught us, going behind their backs is far better.

> There's no fog of war here: each army can see the movements of the other, though descriptions of individual units are limited until you get an eyeball on them



Turning points

The games we played were scored by the number and value of enemy units destroyed within a time limit. This means that expansion is only one strategy, and it's possible to win a round by simply ensuring that you can deflect every attack. But it's not easy to judge – supply depots eventually run dry of resources and, unless your timing's spot on, you'll find yourself unable to keep your defences in a good state of repair. Some maps' resources are placed at such distances apart that it's impossible to build up an impenetrable enclosure around your territory.



Multiplayer enables you to select the nation and even year, so determining the technology you will have at your disposal. In an unhistorical indulgence, you can mix teams in two-versus-two games, singlehandedly reversing the nature of Anglo-German relations in the pre-match settings, along with a large number of other customisation options

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **HI-REZ STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2010**

Global Agenda

With a jettisoned spy-fi setting and oddly low team sizes, this MMOG's agenda bears investigating





For a feature well known to set gamers' hearts afire, *Global Agenda*'s jetpacks are oddly restrictive. They draw power from the same energy pool as the rest of your gear, meaning that any airborne assaults mean dropping into a firefight with your trousers half pulled down

Can you have a miniature massively multiplayer game? Hi-Rez studios seems to think so. Since discovering that "throwing more players into a map doesn't necessarily mean more fun", it has scaled back its RPG/shooter hybrid to boast a maximum of ten vs ten players per match. It's a bitter pill to swallow in a game built on 32 vs 32 Unreal tech, certainly, but as proved by the recent slew of console shooters that integrate experience points, skill-trees and unlockable equipment in the mix, gunfights are often more engaging when you add upgrades. More than enough to make the average *Modern Warfare* veteran's head spin, then. *Global Agenda* also offers a plot, albeit a thin one. In the 22nd century, habitable land is in short supply and dominated by an oppressive android-staffed government known as the Commonwealth. Players take control of the hi-tech agents, who never stop railing against the Commonwealth or, apparently, each other.

This generosity to non-subscribers doesn't end at PvP, either. There are also co-op missions, which see players assaulting

> There are co-op missions, which see players assaulting facilities and avoiding security systems as they make their way through fodder androids to a massive boss-bot

slowly rising numbers. And *Global Agenda* certainly has more numbers than most, even if the mayhem tops out at the bustling mission-select terminals.

It also has a unique business model. Without a subscription fee, *Global Agenda* offers advancement along nine different skill trees spread over four classes – Assault, Recon, Medic and Robotics. It offers experience points to carry you up 40 levels, hundreds of different items of equipment and a host of little implant slots to tweak your character further, as well as cosmetic

Commonwealth facilities and avoiding security systems as they make their way through fodder androids to a massive boss-bot. It's traditional MMOG fare, but the fierce hike in difficulty available (offering players equally serious loot) makes these missions more than just a breather from PvP, while a further twist is applied by the optional Double Agent mode (see 'You, Robot').

All of this begs the question of what *Global Agenda*'s loyal subscribers will actually be paying for, and the answer has to do with a persistent world Hi-Rez is still keeping



dutifully under wraps. Revealed so far is that it'll follow in *Eve Online*'s enormous footsteps, allowing for player-run Agencies (*Global Agenda*'s title for guilds) to compete with one another for territory spread over a hex map. An Agency can then use its pooled currency to build on any area it holds, with Hi-Rez venturing examples of a laboratory that manufactures blueprints used in crafting (another private perk of subscribing), and a factory that creates player-controlled mechs for use in further territorial battles. In a smart idea, players have the option to select whether their Agency will be ready and able 24 hours a day, or if they'll be around to defend their territory from, say, 7pm to 9pm GMT. So there'll be none of *Eve Online*'s desperate 3am phone calls from one Russian pilot to another because the American corporations are attacking again.

But it's this Agency vs Agency combat where that same 20-player limit seems a little less palatable. Hi-Rez's solution is to link concurrent battles, having one team of ten attacking a power station to bring down the turrets in a second battle that determines the fate of the hex, for example. It's potentially cinematic, but with the tarpaulin still draped heavily over this side of the game, it's hard to know for sure.

Better to judge the action itself, which is made available in spades by the latest beta test. It's an interesting creation – thirdperson jetpacking and shooting mixed with the

The wash of helpful and painful area-of-effect abilities that everyone fires off in a melee has the intoxicating effect of making you wonder how you're still alive as you fight on savagely with a subtly-altered character

The Robotics class is interesting. With the power to deploy healing stations, turrets, force-fields, damage bonus fields and anti-turret drones, they're responsible for re-drawing the lines of each team's territory every couple of minutes

potent healing guns and grenades of the Medic, the drones and turrets of Robotics and a ton of area-of-effect abilities that all have cooldown times. The resulting combat is slow enough that a cautious player can often blast off to a hiding spot instead of dying, and with a lack of headshots and some very vague crosshairs, the emphasis is firmly placed on tactics and teamwork. Focusing fire on medics, carefully timing your assaults, organising mass retreats – these are the hallmarks of a match of *Global Agenda*, and it's probably for the best. The more thoughtful, less twitchy pace allows all those little percentile tweaks you made to your character through their skills and loadout to come to the forefront.

Then again, a lack of locational damage and unhelpful crosshairs have often been nails in the coffins of online action games past, and it was a shame to discover jetpacks aren't the only floaty part of *Global Agenda*'s combat. The unfinished build we played was still enjoyable stuff, and being drenched by buffs, debuffs and particle effects while surviving to fight on by the skin of your teeth was a pleasingly regular occurrence. But at this point it's still hard to see *Global Agenda* succeeding where so many action MMOs have failed before it. Just how engaging the finished product proves to be will most likely come down to that open world. Here's hoping Hi-Rez has something pretty spectacular under the tarp.





You, Robot

***Global Agenda*'s Double Agent mode randomly selects one player in the queue for a co-op PvE mission to take control of the most powerful AI robots. Imagine a lonely version of *L4D*'s Versus mode and you're there.**

It's a smart way of spicing up PvE, even if the strafing and leaping of human-controlled enemies makes them stick out among their robo-peers. Player-controlled robots include the stealthy Assassin, best used to assault players from behind as they engage a large mob, and the Hunter, which has the amusing ability to take on the appearance of any member of the other team and become near-immune to their attacks. Valve could do a lot worse than pilfering this idea when designing its new batch of Special Infected.

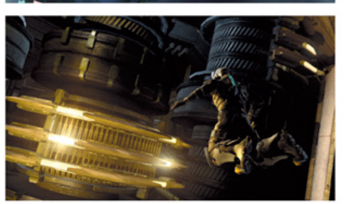


Much continues to be made of the ostensibly recognisable silhouettes for each class, but that *Team Fortress 2* ethos is a little less useful in a game where players can choose to wear thousands of variations on the same futuristic ones

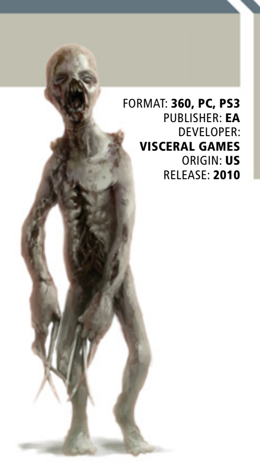




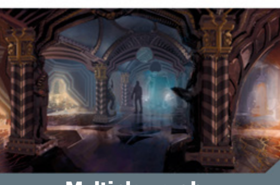




Here we see Clarke modelling the 'Space Ninja' line of engineer clothing, which doesn't strike us as much of an improvement over the heavy ramshackle of the first game's costume. Health and other indicators remain on his back



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **VISCERAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2010**



Multiplay-argh...

The addition of an online multiplayer option seems an odd decision for such an atmospheric singleplayer-focused experience. The team is keen to emphasise this isn't a box ticking add on but a fully featured component of the game. The tagline 'strategically dismember your friends' and the image of a human-vs-necromorph battle suggests an asymmetric *Alien Vs Predator*-style setup, pitching human firepower against alien zombie resilience.

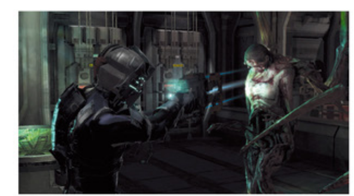
Dead Space 2

The zombie aliens are back, but does EA's horror still have brains?

In retrospect, *Dead Space*'s success was only surprising in the context of the low expectations players had for it. At release, EA CEO John Riccitiello's image makeover hadn't kicked in and the company was still perceived as the corporate bad guy; all yearly updates and marketing-driven 'originals' like *Army Of Two* and *The Godfather*. *Of course* its attempt at an original survival horror was going to be limp.

Except it wasn't. A passionate fanboy tribute to old-school scares like *Resident Evil*, it was tightly scripted, atmospheric and terrifying. The question is, with chief fanboy executive producer Glen Schofield having left to head up Activison's Sledgehammer Games, and the now-higher expectations, can the sequel deliver?

So far it's looking hopeful. The rest of the original team is intact and there's a tight template to stick to – but some changes feel odd. The unwilling hero Isaac Clarke is now a man with a face and voice, rather than a stoic mystery. Arguably that displaces you from 'being' Clarke as well as interrupting the immersion, with cutscenes replacing the previously unobtrusive in-game radio messages. It also runs the risk of alienating fans if Isaac 2.0 (EA's own term) turns out to be unlikable. The action has also shifted from a cramped, shadowy mining ship to a large space-borne city filled with churches, zoos and monorails. The opulent interiors are more *Bayonetta* than Nostromo.



Hopefully, the clumsy melee attack won't be 'upgraded' for the new action focus. The necromorphs were scary in the first place because if they got close, you were useless



Top right: are you tougher than a ten-year-old? The other images here confirm the return of sequences in which you're dragged and have to fight free, and of course zero-G. Glowing weak spots? Yes, probably those, too

Despite these misgivings, what we've seen of Clarke's return is promising. A new monster in the form of a three-legged beast, dropping from the ceiling of an otherwise silent hall, provided a suitably buttock-clenching moment, and the subsequent fight to escape its grasp recalled the panicked tentacle fights from the original game. A creature in the style of *Resi Evil 3*'s Nemesis, it pursued Clarke to later battle him in a lift.

Child necromorphs show Visceral prepared to follow its fiction into all sorts of dark corners. In *Dead Space*, Lurkers were mutated to the point that they weren't obviously recognisable as the reanimated corpses of dead babies. In *Dead Space 2*, however, it's impossible to ignore the motion-captured lolloping gait of these new infant monsters. The skull-pulping melee attack used when they get too close only makes such encounters more unpleasant.

The sudden ambushes that shatter the calm are as distressing as ever, as hordes of space dead flood into cramped rooms. The newly added destructibility also adds to the panicked chaos as walls, windows and furniture shatter into pieces. And it's not just there for looks – the shrapnel can be grabbed with Isaac's Force-like TK (telekinetic) power and thrown violently to injure and impale. Similarly, the new javelin gun can pin charging necromorphs to walls, to each other and, once upgraded, also delivers a lethal electrical charge.

Producer Steve Papoutsis is keen to emphasise a more action-oriented 'rollercoaster ride' of highs and lows this time around, the concept being that the quiet lows will be more terrifying when contrasted against the epic highs – moments like fighting your way out from the belly of a giant alien, or battling atop a speeding space train. That could be code for an action-focused shooter that relies on cutscenes for exposition and scares, abandoning the dread of the Ishimura for a tilt at the *Gears Of War* crowd. But Visceral's past form suggests much greater ambition and ultimately a game that, despite first impressions, will surprise the cynics most of all.


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Jump in.
XBOX 360 LIVE







When things begin collapsing you'll sometimes be able to dodge, but if an opponent decides to drop a bridge on you and times it right there's not much that can be done



We were trailing for almost an entire race before, on the last lap, as far as we could tell a shopping centre fell on the pack, and we romped through the debris to victory

Split Second

Black Rock Studio lets us take its racer for a spin, and brings the house down every lap

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **BLACK ROCK STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q2 2010**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E204**

Split Second's basic concept is over-the-top combat racing, where the track and its surroundings are the weapons. 'The environment is your WEAPON!' is the kind of tagline we're all over-familiar with, of course, but here it means that a different setting should give a different type of racing experience. In essence, whatever's ahead of you is likely to blow up, collapse or begin banging all over the place, and the bigger moments change the track layout permanently.

We took a spin around the docks level, the centrepiece of which is an enormous and slightly landlocked ferry. The first time around, an unseen challenger battered us into a wall by prompting a hanging cargo crate to fly from the side of the track into our side; undaunted, we flew after it, screaming just below the underside of the central ship. By the time we'd got back around, several of our unlucky foes were just ahead of us, and it was time to trigger something big: the ship instantly crashed into the ground, flattening those poor souls beneath it, and we cruised over the new makeshift ramp and on to a different part of the track, feeling more then a little satisfied.

On the third lap, you can do something even more spectacular with the downed ship, but we won't spoil it. There are other examples: a city track (framed by a mini Golden Gate Bridge) has all sorts of criss-crossing concrete roads, smashed through spectacularly by the cargo of a helicopter above. The roads overhead collapse in a hail of debris, engulfing your car as you careen through a chicane. The chopper simply hovers there like nothing's happened, getting ready to drag trucks across the road or just pile into the tarmac itself the next time you speed by.

The demo version we played presented two different handling models: on one circuit the car felt positively greased lightning, while on the other the tarmac seemed to clasp like Velcro every time we attempted to drift. The nuts and bolts are clearly still being tweaked, then, but, given the nature of Black Rock's previous racer, *Pure*, it seems safe to say that what you eventually get to play will lean more towards an unadulterated arcade-style feel, with plenty of opportunity for a fast and loose approach.

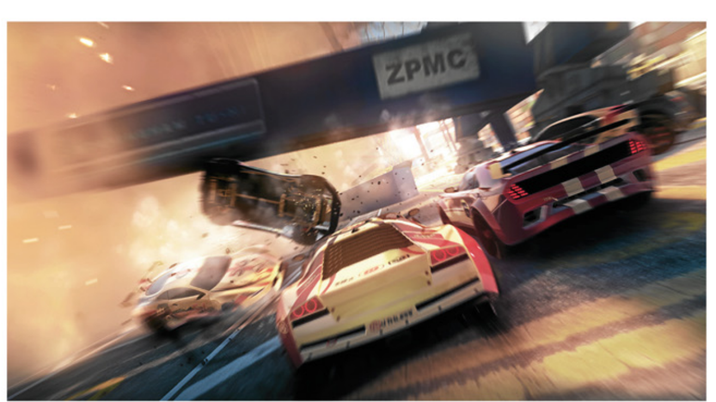
The structure's designed to encourage such play, anyway: the whole thing's part of a TV show, which explains away all the cities blowing up, and means the singleplayer is structured around 'episodes', each one with five events and a finale. They're intended to be a half-hour in length each, ending with teasers for what's ahead, and should allow Black Rock to showcase *Split Second*'s multifarious ideas more effectively than a straight career mode.

It's the pacing that will make *Split Second* great or otherwise: with so many disparate elements making up every single track, there's a danger that it could feel like a bit of a jumble. But when it all comes together – as it does several times in every race during our demo session – it's not just thrilling driving, it's explosive action.



Van damage

Our recent demo with Black Rock showed off a work-in-progress of one of *Split Second*'s alternate modes, a score-attack challenge that speaks to the young John Connor in all of us. It recalls the canal chase sequence in Terminator 2 featuring the T-1000 in a truck, except with more enemies and the addition of exploding barrels. The trucks are huge monoliths, and when they get ahead of you liberally scatter obstacles in their wake. Drone cars begin turning up pretty sharpish, trying to put you off while the big boys line up the kill. And you've got to keep the clock from ticking all the way down to the bottom by driving really, really fast. Even here the neat touches don't stop: when time runs out, the game changes to sudden death mode, and your pursuers get very nasty. When finished, this mode will be something special.



One of *Split Second*'s strengths is that driving a track twice doesn't necessarily see the same things happening, with the career mode gradually unlocking more and more spectacularly exploding scenery as you return to scenes of past triumph



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Jump in.



FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **HUDSON SOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010**

Calling

Hudson Soft leaves its comfort zone, and tries out a few horror standards

Calling is an experience divided between the extraordinary and the mundane, the surprising and the predictable, the game and the hardware. A horror game played out in first person, the key mechanic and narrative device is the mobile phone – scattered throughout the game's environments, and brought into yours through the Wii Remote's speaker.

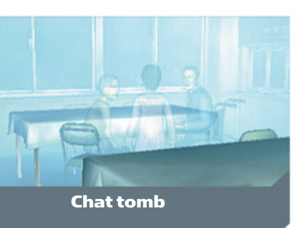
Mobile phones connect the protagonists with the environments – and the ghosts. They can be used to escape to new areas (though this is all part of a strictly linear progression), and often a call will cue up a scare. It's a good platform for nasty tricks. In what seems a fairly complete preview build there are two standout moments. In the first, the tension of a silent environment is shattered by a cacophonous (and tasteless) ringtone. Tracking down the offending object, we pick it up only to be told by the caller that "that's my phone. I'm coming to get it". Then they ring back every so often to tell us how close they're getting. Brrr.

In the second, we're trapped in a classroom with three schoolgirl apparitions who aren't too friendly, and presented with a series of digits gouged into one of the desks. Escaping the attentions of the trio, you have to bring up the phone interface and punch in the number as they try to grab at you. Get it right and the room fades to black, the spirits' hands grasping at nothing.

Having hit upon such neat ideas almost straight off the bat, who can blame Hudson Soft's designers for phoning in a few of the other scares? There are more than a few occasions when a ringing sound means a heavy-breathing nonentity muttering vague threats, and making you wish you could just hang up (in an odd bit of polite design, you can only do so after the call is finished). It also merrily breaks the horror rule – don't use the same scare twice – as a matter of course, blunting effective tricks through repetition.

These missteps are combined with visuals that, once again, do Nintendo's magical box a disservice. There seems to be an unwritten rule that ambitious thirdparty games are allowed to get away with boxy environments, numb faces and an absence of textures that would embarrass the ageing GameCube. In one location, we visit four different rooms with exactly the same interior, down to the placement of individual bags. It is to *Calling*'s credit that you can largely ignore the roughness of its world, though hardly to its advantage.

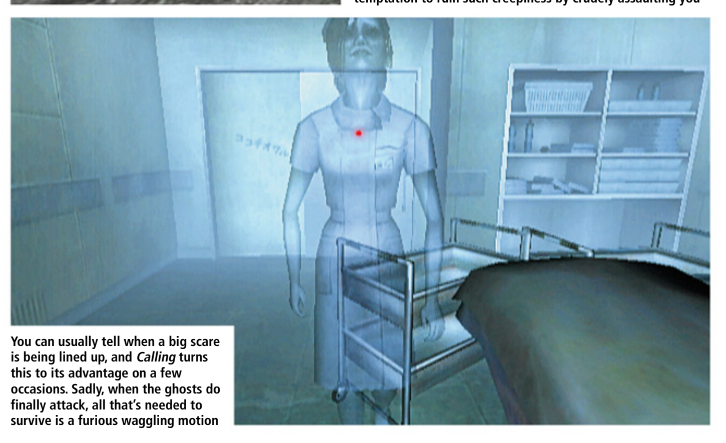
Calling at once surprises with its narrative imagination and ideas for the Wii hardware, and in the same moment shows an over-reliance on genre tropes (please, creepy little girls with tendril-like hair?) and an utter lack of faith in Wii's capabilities. It occupies a halfway house: not as good as *Fatal Frame 4*, much better than *Ju-On*. But it has enough neat touches and genuine scares (every so often, when closing your inventory screen, a kid's face appears for a fraction of a second) that it's worth persevering through the flapping mouths, the clunkiness, and the reheated J-horror staples.



Chat tomb

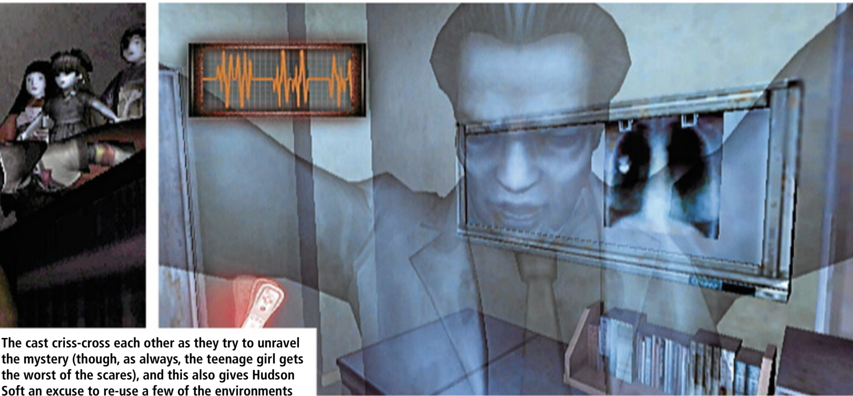
***Calling*'s story begins with a chatroom called The Black Page, which several curious people are logging on to after hearing it might have something to do with the disappearance of three schoolgirls. At the right time, something nasty's supposed to happen – and it does. This gives *Calling* an ensemble cast whose stories criss-cross each other, which is used to good effect. The translation is generally fine, though perhaps lacking anything truly distinctive, but is a masterpiece next to the voice-acting. It really does run the gamut, from horrifying wails and sinister whispered threats to bored ghosts and old ladies who sound like they're ordering doughnuts rather than fleeing a mortal threat.**

***Calling*'s visuals may be basic, but that doesn't stop it creating a certain ambience, particularly when it can rely on a lot of fog and soft focus. Best of all, the game mostly resists the temptation to ruin such creepiness by crudely assaulting you**



You can usually tell when a big scare is being lined up, and *Calling* turns this to its advantage on a few occasions. Sadly, when the ghosts do finally attack, all that's needed to survive is a furious waggling motion





The cast criss-cross each other as they try to unravel the mystery (though, as always, the teenage girl gets the worst of the scares), and this also gives Hudson Soft an excuse to re-use a few of the environments



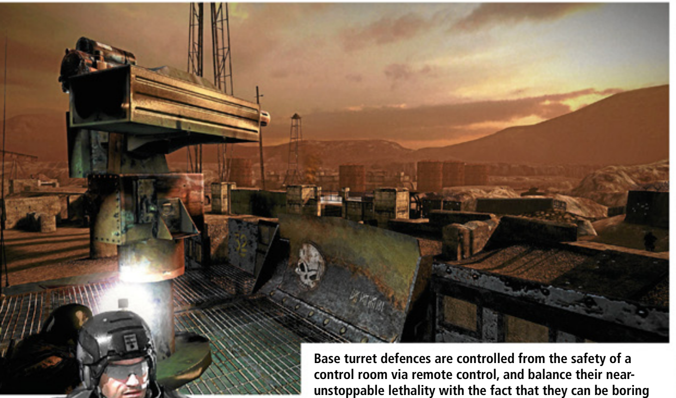
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FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **ZIPPER INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **JANUARY 29**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E203, E204, E207**

MAG

Fight the war or lead it. But is it worth going career?





Base turret defences are controlled from the safety of a control room via remote control, and balance their near-unstoppable lethality with the fact that they can be boring



Most online shooters live in the moment: grab a gun and kill everything to death for as long as your interest holds. Putting the graft in might get you bigger guns or new abilities but what are you really achieving beyond twitchy reactions and a constant urge to reload?

That's where *MAG* comes in. While most of the attention has been on its 256 players (which, in-game, creates a map resembling a turf war between rival ant nests), what's more likely to be its making is the character progression across three rival factions; adding a career path up the ranks, from trench-pounding grunt to shot-calling leader.

That many people with guns all thinking they're the hero should, of course, create one ungodly mess. But the beta not only proves the game works technically, with little framerate or lag issues (although textures and details take a hit), it proves the concept's sound. People *want* to take it seriously, and obey the command structure. One forum thread we discovered was filled with squad leaders earnestly discussing insubordination (overall opinion: kick 'em). Let's just stop for a moment and imagine how that conversation might go in a *Halo 3* lobby…

Ensuring this hierarchy runs smoothly is a simple command structure. A game is broken down into several smaller matches all happening on one giant map. Within these sub-conflicts are multiple, basic objectives – removing enemy air support so you can use helicopters as forward spawn points, say. Or removing roadblocks to let vehicles through. Even main objectives are simple – destroying two smaller pump stations before taking out a fuel depot, and so on.

Responsibility for each of these lesser tasks is divided between platoons made up of four eight-player squads, a total of 32 players. Four platoons then make up a side of 128 players. The leaders, who through earning in-game XP have gained the right to command, can then designate objectives though a simple point and click interface. These choices then appear in-game as flashing markers on screen.

It's an intelligent system because those not in charge aren't being obviously bossed around, while leaders are able to effectively control the battle. There's one central objective but numerous ways to play it. Do you push back enemy spawn points? Or concentrate on opening up roads to let armour back up your infantry? Whatever's chosen, the loyalty of the troops is encouraged through FRAGO bonuses – additional XP rewarded for following orders. It's definitely a broader, more involving prospect than prestiging *Modern Warfare 2* to death, and the beta suggests that PS3 is ready for the responsibility.



The broad scale of the game creates massive open areas that players will have to adjust to. Gone are the dependable post-spawn routes and bottlenecks, and in their place are maps that are far more unpredictable

Three's company

There is a trio of rival factions, each with a very different appeal. Raven are wealthy *Ghost Recon*-style military with shiny black armour and futuristic guns. SVER on the other hand are a ragtag bunch of eastern European chancers touting rusty AKs and post-apocalyptic chic. The final group, Valor, are the Naked Snakes, noble soldier breeds with a current US army loadout. First experiences with low-level characters suggest that the differences are mainly cosmetic, so it will be interesting to see if higher classes open up more tactical variations.

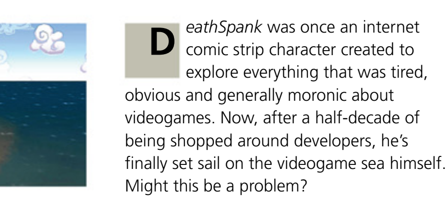


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FORMAT: **360, PS3, PC**
PUBLISHER: **HOTHEAD GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2010**

DeathSpank

Those who fight clichés should take care lest they become one



*D*eathSpank was once an internet comic strip character created to explore everything that was tired, obvious and generally moronic about videogames. Now, after a half-decade of being shopped around developers, he's finally set sail on the videogame sea himself. Might this be a problem?

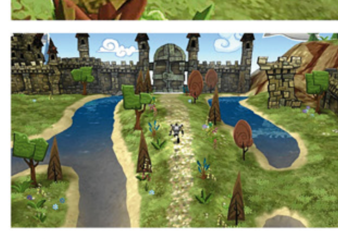
Ron Gilbert's forthcoming action-RPG certainly delivers on your favourite clichés with a lusty fervour: barrels – reassuringly explosive – litter the landscape, the kingdom has fallen to an evil blight, and hordes of familiar enemies shamble and plod through purposefully creaky settings ranging from enchanted castles to rustic villages and the bone-strewn lairs of giant spiders.

Ironically, what might step in to save this self-proclaimed blend of *Monkey Island* and *Diablo* is if it really is a blend of *Monkey Island* and *Diablo* – and the signs are tentatively promising on this front. The inventory screen is temptingly vast, opportunities to gain experience points are lurking around every boulder or palm tree, and a pleasant thicket of dialogue options sprout up regularly as you slowly ramble through the story.

Likewise, *DeathSpank*'s rolling papercraft world is theoretically charming at least, but, as a Hothead game, you're never far from the friendly sensation that corners are being cut. The art team has alighted on a spectrum of uniquely unappealing institutional browns and wet greens, and there's a definite impression created by some of the set-piece locations that the art design relies on the charm of the idea as much as the implementation. Hopefully, that's not an approach the wider game will choose to take as well.

Pirates were a dead cert with this gaming lineage, but *DeathSpank* still over-delivers. Launching out across the ocean should break up the muddy hiking







Orcs may have been renamed Orques but, thankfully, they still feel the need to attack you with a range of brutally primitive weaponry. *DeathSpank*'s arsenal may well be a high point, weapons revealed to date including a giant boot stuck on the end of a hammer

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **ACQUIRE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEB 18 (JPN), TBA (UK, US)**

100 ManTon No Barabara

Sony's CAMP competition takes Dig Dug II to the skies

*A*fter years of fervently promoting its 3D credentials, PSP's recent experiments in bright and brazen 2D have proven hugely successful, perhaps fuelled by the swelling ranks of gamers weaned on Flash-based browser games. *100 ManTon No Barabara* is soon to join the handheld's catalogue of broadly appealing 2D fare, with its skyship battles drawn in an equally assured and eccentric visual style that hints at both Yellow Submarine and the patchwork tapestries of *Monster Hunter*'s loading screens.

The result of PlayStation's Creator Audition Mash Up Project, a Japanese-only talent competition, *100 ManTon No Barabara* is something like a highly evolved aerial version of *Dig Dug II* – the often unremembered sequel in which players carved up an island into ever smaller fragments by drilling at geological faults. In *100 ManTon No Barabara*, however, the islands are colourful flying fortresses, busy with cannon and robotic sentries who must be vanquished, and prisoners who must be released so they can parachute to safety while you deal with the ship itself.

Armed with simple weapons and items, the player can divide up the ship – the smaller of the two portions tumbling down to earth. As with *Dig Dug II*, the bigger the chunk, the more points you get, but here the sum is calculated from the material's weight, too. Some substances may not be so easily cut, requiring the player to hunt for more sophisticated tools to chew through the increased tensile strength. With time pressure, constant bombardment by enemies and prisoners to free, things can get hectic, requiring shooter-like dexterity to navigate the levels. We rarely relish the prospect of a talent competition entrant revisiting a classic, but in this case *100 ManTon No Barabara* promises to bring a pace and visual panache all of its own.



100 ManTon No Barabara will be released on UMD and as a download in Japan, though at ¥4,980 (£34) for the disc and ¥3,800 (£26) for the digital edition, the latter's almost 25 per cent cheaper. What is the future for UMDs?





Your character's the leader of a town defence force, with the population sometimes following in step, and these dastardly ships hover above your homes. They must die



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PSP
PlayStation Portable
SONY
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FORMAT: **360, COIN-OP**
PUBLISHER: **G.REV**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**



Senko No Ronde DUO

Two's company in G.rev's latest iteration of the shooter-fighter hybrid



G.rev's ambitions for *Senko No Ronde* were to innovate in a genre that it had exhaustively exploited – its team largely comprising of ex-Taito employees responsible for that company's catalogue of shooters. And so it looked to the fighter genre, meshing a one-versus-one battle system to mech warfare and the over-abundance of laser bolts and plasma blasts we now associate with the shooter. Since its 2005 release, fans have been clamouring for a sequel, but G.rev has so far addressed their demands with numerous revisions.

The latest is *DUO*. While the name does not, as it sounds, imply full sequel status, it does indicate the evolution of the battle system to include a pair of pilots controlled by a single player. The first pilot chosen determines the type of craft – the giant mechs known in the series' lore as Rounders. The co-pilot, meanwhile, indicates the type of attacks and techniques the craft will be able to use, and with 12 pilots and 12 co-pilots to choose from there are many combinations, each of which changes the manner in which the game plays out.

DUO has been in Japanese arcades since July last year, though the intervening time hasn't just been spent porting the game, but adding 360-specific content, including story, score, attack and training modes. The engine has also undergone a fair bit of spit and polish, opening the door for G.rev to embark on higher-spec projects in the future. While *Senko No Ronde*'s following in Japan's arcades will always be dwarfed by the populist obsession with Gundam titles, *DUO*'s release on 360 offers some hope for its committed fans overseas.



While *DUO* was built first for the arcades, using Taito's Type X² board, G.rev always had an eye on porting it. As such, although the *DUO* port is only 20 per cent complete, G.rev anticipates work to be a speedy process. Ubisoft brought the first iteration to the west, but there's no news yet on a similar deal for *DUO*





Once again, with its concentric rings and waves of death, spectators will struggle to work out what's taking place

King Of Fighters: Sky Stage

SNK's battle-hardened fighters sample a different kind of combat

FORMAT: **360, COIN-OP**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **SNK PLAYMORE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010**

While hardly a return to the glory days, the arcade shooter's stuttering lifeline has been brought back to something like a steady pulse, thanks to defibrillation delivered by the likes of XBLA and PSN. While the real arcades are seeing some names of fine shooter vintage reappear, SNK Playmore's downloadable contribution to Xbox 360 is a somewhat unexpected turn, considering that the company has little heritage in the genre. Announced along with a slew of over 30 other games and Japanese localisations coming to Microsoft's console in the next year, eyebrows were raised even higher when it was discovered that SNK had chosen to rework its popular fighting franchise as a vertically scrolling shooter.

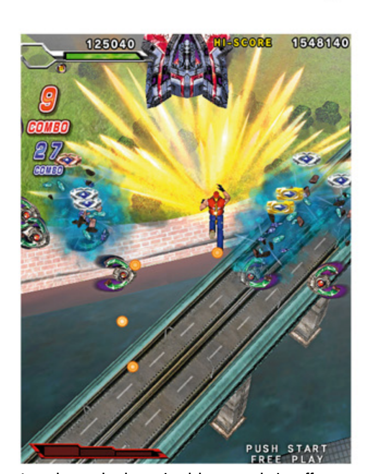
Characters from the *King Of Fighters* series soar through space as they laser wave after wave of enemies. There are the shooter staples – a life gauge, score indicator and stock of bombs – but a number of conventions from *King Of Fighters*' other games have also made the leap. A combo meter with a set of two gauges manages your special attacks. One fills up over time, and is depleted with use of the oxymoronic Standard Special attacks, which need to be charged and unleashed. The second gauge commutes special attack powers over the period of time it takes to run down, but the player is unable to fire any normal shots during that time.

King Of Fighters has attained popularity in its home market that has never quite translated to its western audience, but even avid fans are perplexed by its reinvention as a scrolling shooter. We wonder if the spin-off is consigned, not to bullet hell, but another kind of purgatory altogether.



Many of the special moves will be known to players of the series, such as Kyo Kusanagi's Flame Burst, while other actions see you clear enemies, teleport and freeze opponents





It can be very hard to resist elaborate explosion effects, especially when they're this angular and well behaved. Despite their tiny size, characters remain easy to identify



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THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

Bungie explains how Reach, the culmination of its decade working on Halo, will be ending with a bang

"From the beginning you know the end." Since the very opening moments of *Reach*'s first trailer, the way the game will close has been clear. In calamity. Loss. The Covenant claiming the lives of 700 million people. And in Bungie's exit from *Halo*.

Reach is the end of an air of finality which has lingered over the series since *Halo 3*'s call to 'finish the fight'. After all, Bungie has slowly been cutting loose from *Halo* – Ensemble Studios' *Halo Wars* was the first game not to be made by its originator, and the whole *Halo* machine is now run by the Microsoft division 343 Industries, which publishes the games and also produces anime, books and comics.

Reach also marks Bungie's new beginning. As we visit, work is proceeding on its 'secret project', even with *Reach* in full production – and the studio, designed for 70 and now home to 130, is full. The boardroom is occupied by animators and is open to the cavernous main floor, and the area just outside the kitchen is cluttered with dusty hard drives and thick coils of wires.

The only empty space is a room on the upper gallery which, until a few days before we visit, was where the secret project team worked. They now occupy a nearby office – the first time in Bungie's history the team has been physically split up, and an obvious pain to a creative culture built on multi-disciplinary collaboration. The plan is to move into a new, purpose-built building in nearby Bellevue, the Seattle suburb



TITLE: **HALO: REACH**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2010**

Photograph: **Charles Peterson**





Reach's leads: creative director Marcus Lehto (left), originally art director on *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *Halo 2* and *3*, and executive producer Joseph Tung, who previously produced *Halo 3*'s multiplayer

WHAT'S IN THE SANDBOX?

Reach's weapon-set has been streamlined from that of *Halo 3*, so every weapon has a specific role. "There were so many different weapons and grenades that it wasn't clear to the average player why they would pick this over that for a particular encounter," Merrill says. So we're back to just frag and plasma grenades – no more spike grenades or firebombs. The human weapons, meanwhile, all hit more or less instantly after pulling the trigger; before, the battle rifle would take a frame or so to travel to medium range. "That's going to cause the human weapons to feel more precise, more powerful." Generally, the changes are small and considered: Merrill's most ambitious desire is to up the interval between sniper shots to reduce its power. "*Halo 3*'s sniper is much faster than most games – you can drop four people before reloading. I would be happy if you could only drop two but I don't think I can push it that far and not create an uprising."

that's home to Valve. But the project's delayed and it won't be until *Reach* ships in the autumn that the company will be whole again.

That *Reach* has a very different atmosphere to any other *Halo* game won't come as a shock. Think of the standout images from eight years of games and the chances are you're remembering the pristine blue skies, sandy beaches and verdant green of the *Halo* worlds, glowing blue blood and bright green plasma. But *Reach* is a grittier, moodier place and the target of a harder, more alien, antagonist.

With that in mind, here's a list of the stuff that you may have pinned as being quintessentially *Halo* but which won't appear in *Reach*: Grunts squealing jokes and making pratfalls, pink needler fire, and *that* music, a theme which, other than those of *Zelda* and *Mario*, does more to epitomise its host game than any other.

That's because *Halo: Reach* isn't *Halo 4*. We settle in a meeting room on the upper gallery in the back of the studio with creative director **Marcus Lehto**, who was art director on *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *2* and *3*, and executive producer **Joseph Tung**. "We desired to make a standalone title, something that is the culmination of a decade of our efforts building *Halo* titles," Lehto says emphatically. "*Halo: Reach* is probably the most powerful title we've built to date with regards to story, to character, new gameplay features we're throwing at the player, new experiences overall."

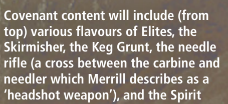
"*Halo: Reach* for us is not *Halo 4*," Tung substantiates. "It's not a continuation of the Master Chief story, nor is it the start of a new trilogy. For us, it's a completely standalone game."

But it's still absolutely *Halo*. You'll have clocked the hints as to the fact you play the campaign with a squad, but you can forget any notions of *Ghost Recon*-style close tactics. You play as a new member of the six-man-strong Noble Team, a group of Spartan-IIIs, but think of them as fulfilling similar roles to the computer-controlled Arbiter, or the ODSTs. They will fight alongside you, following your actions and requiring no assistance. Indeed, Tung plays the first and third missions for us largely ignoring his teammates; the combat flows between assault and retreat, close-quarters and careful aiming, just like we're used to.

Though we see concept art for sterile ONI facilities, towering cities and rough industrial sites, the Reach of the two missions we witness is the hinterlands of the recent trailer – far-flung highland homesteads and wind-blown military outposts. Noble Team has been sent out to investigate why a communications array has gone offline and what's happened to the troopers originally sent to investigate. ONI, the UNSC's intelligence branch, thinks it's down to insurrectionists – the local population, descended from the planet's original pioneers, is fiercely independent – but we know better.

The opening walk down a hillside, among large grey boulders and low, scrubby plants, is accompanied by typical military chatter about watching sectors and staying sharp – though at





Covenant content will include (from top) various flavours of Elites, the Skirmisher, the Keg Grunt, the needle rifle (a cross between the carbine and needler which Merrill describes as a 'headshot weapon'), and the Spirit






Reach's health system is similar to that of *Combat Evolved* and *ODST*. The shield will not recharge as quickly as *Halo 3*'s

this stage in development a lot of it is computer-generated. "Nothing in the game is finished," Tung says. "A lot of the guys on the floor would not be happy we're showing off the game at this point." But though the odd texture is low-resolution and the colour tones and detail look a little flat, it performs extremely sturdily, and the level of scattered detail is higher than *Halo 3*'s. Lehto estimates that they're around 70 per cent complete, and it's already possible to play through the entire campaign. "We're further along now than we were for *Halo 3* in terms of quality and how much you can play," campaign lead **Chris Opdahl** tells us.

In the near distance, a plume of smoke rises from a homestead. As Tung nears it, the squad plans its approach in a loose huddle. It's a demonstration of one of the many augmentations Bungie has made to *Halo 3*'s engine. Lehto describes the older engine as having been 'gutted', with almost no component left untouched. AIs can add scripted behaviours to their lexicon of actions, so instead of snapping helplessly into pre-canned actions for story purposes, they can now choose whether to enact them. Should they detect an enemy while engaged in forming up on a door, they can move out of it to deal with the threat before returning to complete the job. "We think it's really interesting, because it allows us to do the things we haven't done so well, like craft these little moments without them being really heavy-handed," Opdahl explains.

Tung and squad approach the homestead, but all is quiet. The atmosphere is tense and expectant – a flurry of movement in a doorway of a building a little farther along the path teases us about what's to come, but it's quiet when Tung gets there. The squad leader fires out commands to the diversely specialised team. There's the heavy weapons guy, the sniper, the assault specialist with the skull painted on his visor, and the lighter-armoured female stealth expert with a robotic arm. All are Spartan-IIIs, the cheaper-to-produce successors to Master Chief's Spartan-II project. *Halo* fiction holds that Spartan-IIIs are taken from a wider pool of human subjects and wear less effective armour – they're a 'fire and forget' military force, expected to get the job done but not come back.

And they don't do everything with their helmets on. "We intend to show Spartan faces for the first time in one of our games," Tung explains. "That speaks to one of the major investments we've made in the game, which is to have truly believable human performances in *Reach*."

"It's very important for us to connect with the human under the armour, to show that these Spartan-IIIs are vulnerable; they're not just superhumans capable of doing anything," Lehto continues. "Due to their tenacity and tactics they've been able to adapt to the environment and survive, but they are human to the core and they suffer the same things that humans suffer. This is something about the Spartans we wanted to get into to make the story a lot deeper and richer."

What they lack in Master Chief's brawn they attempt to make up for by scavenging whatever they can from their surroundings. The result is the mix of battle dress seen on the squad and the fact that you will be able to personalise your character with a wide variety of different armours. A player's appearance will now be consistent across singleplayer, co-op and multiplayer, even though alternative armour types won't grant special abilities.

That's because *Reach* features 'armour abilities' instead. Bungie has rethought *Halo 3*'s equipment so that they're now persistent, rather than one-time use. The first we see, as Tung's character puffs and huffs towards another homestead, is dash. The burst of speed lasts a few seconds and is then subject to a short cooldown before it can be used again. "We weren't super-satisfied with how equipment came off in *Halo 3*," says **Sage Merrill**, *Reach*'s awesomely bearded sandbox design lead. (Sandbox, by the way, is Bungie's holistic term for all systems relating to combat.) "You would come across some item that was shiny, so maybe you'd pick up and maybe you wouldn't, and then you'd get an icon, some abstract thing in your hub. Because it was for a one-off use,

"Halo: Reach is not Halo 4. It's not a continuation of the Master Chief story, nor is it the start of a new trilogy. For us, it's a completely standalone game"



Reach's atmospheric graphical effects are much improved over those seen in *Halo 3*, with many more dynamic lighting elements which allow for dramatic shadows and moving light sources in interiors, as well as subtle fogging effects which help enrich the game's beautiful vistas

you'd end up saving it, thinking: 'I'm going to keep that till that encounter when I really, really need it', and then: 'Oh. The mission's over'."

Armour abilities are therefore designed to work these abilities into the general combat cycle, so you'll use them as much as you use grenades, and plan assaults based on what abilities you like and which you have to hand, whether dropped by enemies or left in supply stashes. Though the only other ability we see is active camo, Merrill hints readily enough that we can at least expect to see the power drainer and grav lift from *Halo 3*, but we'll likely see new ones, too. "We don't want these to be directly offensive, to up your damage or make you more powerful, because that's not interesting and the job of weapons," Merrill explains. "It's much more interesting to give you abilities to confuse the other players, escape or defend yourself."

Back to the playthrough: Tung enters a farm building and finds the bodies of two troopers, one slumped bloodily against a wall, the other pinned to it. He moves up to another floor with windows looking out over the farm's yard and open country beyond it. And, suddenly, in a hail of plasma fire and with the first appearance of a new *Halo* enemy, the first Covenant attack commences. Leading the charge are feathered Skirmishers speeding towards the building – Tung fails to down a single one before they've made it inside. Though a similar size and shape to Jackals, they're of a very different disposition, moving rapidly in packs to flank you.

Tung fights his way outside and, though this is the game's first encounter, Bungie isn't afraid to throw a dropship – the Spirit, a version of the one seen in *Halo: Combat Evolved* that Bungie refers to as the 'tuning fork' – and a cohort of Grunts at him. Constantly harried by the Spirit's turret, Tung uses large rocks for cover.



The new DMR, a powerful single-shot rifle with 3x zoom, overlaps many of the Battle Rifle's strengths, but Bungie's not fixed on leaving the trusty BR out

The assault has all the dynamic, interesting and player-focused hallmarks of classic *Halo* – the differences are largely tweaks. The radar now locates targets in 3D space using *Elite*-style lines. The visor highlights various environmental features and overlays information about them, and also, as seen in *ODST*, features night vision. The pause screen mentions player 'grades' and 'credits' – though Bungie's not prepared to discuss these yet, they're presumably part of the character customisation system.

More immediately apparent, though, is an entirely new timbre to the assault rifle. It sounds markedly more powerful than the otherwise satisfying chugging stutter heard in previous games. The plasma pistol, too, now delivers punchy bursts of energy, hitting home with fizzling impact. The weapons' visual effects are similarly amplified – the AR delivers smoke and showers of bouncing sparks, while the explosion from a charged plasma shot bursts in a scorching blast of green. "We wanted, especially with Covenant weaponry, something much more violent and visceral, so it felt that the plasma balls weren't just fuzzy balls floating through the air," Lehto says. "They should feel that when they hit they pack a punch, and continue burning through the material they hit." It's another nod to Bungie's attempt to lend *Reach* a more serious tone next to the colourful sci-fi of previous *Halo*s.

"We wanted, especially with Covenant weaponry, something much more violent, so it felt that the plasma balls weren't just fuzzy balls floating through the air"



Reach's skyscapes and backdrops are arresting images, light clouds subtly brushing against distant mountains, the sun's rays penetrating a delicate haze, all accented by the glow from the second moon

To illustrate the point, Tung loads a special test arena to demonstrate how the team has tweaked the engine to create vast explosions. Next to *Halo 3*'s stylised streams of fire, *Reach*'s are huge, dirty and lingering, raining clods of earth all around. "There's a lot to this explosion that we'd never have been able to do in the *Halo 3* engine," Tung says. "The amount of debris, the colliding particles, the amount of smoke that gets left behind."

"The more we had things blowing up and





The six figures above comprise Noble Team. Clockwise from top left: squad leader Carter-259, heavy weapons guy Jorge-052, stealth specialist Kat-320, sniper Jun-266, assault specialist Emile-239, and the player



Reach's freeform third mission takes place at night, allowing you to take full advantage of the active camo armour ability and assassination moves

particles raining down from the sky and impact effects from weaponry splashing around the players, the more chaotic and visceral it felt," Lehto continues, as Tung mans a turret to show how the showers of sparks – which reach *Burnout* densities – not only correctly bounce off objects but also their normal-map details. The Warthog, meanwhile, now kicks up clouds of dust like it did back in *Halo: Combat Evolved*.

The models for AI enemies, and allies, boast remarkable levels of new detail in the form of higher-resolution textures and more polygons. Enemies and allies will have more individual features to denote their ranks and provide greater visual variety. Re-introducing the Elite as a foe has taken a significant part in the art team's effort. "Understanding it was our nemesis for *Reach* – we wanted to re-visualise it, rebuilding it from the skeleton up," Lehto says. "We're also harkening back to *Combat Evolved* and some of the things we loved about it. The way the Elite moved and looked – what we built almost a decade ago."

We also see a new Grunt model, for the time being nicknamed the Keg Grunt, based on one of artist Shi Kai Wang's first concepts for *Halo*, and see on one of the many permutations of Marine models a green monocle which is another throwback to the first *Halo*. "One of the goals was to bring back some of the colour tones and forms we had in *Combat Evolved*'s Marines," Lehto explains. "*The Halo 3* Marine was nothing to write home about, so that was a serious kick in our pants to do something better."

The result is a big step beyond the models seen in *Halo 3*, especially the poised and regal Elite, and it's all backed by a new animation system which smoothly blends movement between standing, walking and running as well as jumps, grenade throws and firing – yet another part of the engine to be revamped.

PLANET TALES

"We want the player to connect with Reach, to understand and feel that a culture exists on the planet, so there's some sense of loss by the end of the game as it's lost under the crush of the Covenant," Lehto says. Environment art lead Mike Zak indicates a rich backstory to Reach, which has been settled for around 150 years. It's a story expressed in the pioneers' descendants' homesteads – rounded and enclosed, they're comfortable but practical, shuttered against Reach's forceful climate and bunkered into hillsides. It also relates their independent nature – powered by windmills, they're off the grid and self-sustaining. The fiction is supported by greater environmental detail than anything found in *Halo 3*, with much of Zak's attention focused on making the proportions feel natural, a subtlety which previous *Halo*s, taking into account Master Chief's seven-foot stature and ten-foot jump, found difficult to achieve. How? *Reach*'s Spartan-IIIs are slightly shorter.



Those left unmoved by the distinctly unremarkable facial and body animation of *Halo 3*, especially that seen in cutscenes, can rest assured that *Reach*'s are a step beyond. "Animation was one thing we gutted and revamped because it never took that generational leap forward from *Combat Evolved* all the way through to *ODST*," admits Lehto. The expressive movements seen in the recent trailer will be standard; feet will stick to the ground during turning animations with subtle fidelity – and *Reach* is Bungie's first game using mo-cap. Lehto is careful to emphasise that he

THEME PARK

The realisation that *Reach* won't feature *Halo*'s classic theme has caused some dismay among certain **Edge** staffers, but its absence makes a lot of sense, not least to keep composer and audio director O'Donnell creatively stimulated. "I probably shouldn't say this, but I beat those themes to death," he says. "Ten years of *Halo* themes – *ODST* was a wonderful chance to expand and do something different. It still feels *Halo*, I guess, but only because I'm writing it. *Reach* is before all the events of *Halo*, it's more sombre, and it should have its own theme, its own feel, its own music. Whether or not there should be any foreshadowing of *Halo* themes, it'll probably happen in some way." As for that feel, it's to reflect *Reach*'s sombre mood and the strength of the Spartans: "They don't run from anything and they don't run to anything, and I wanted to express that the settlers are from eastern Europe. It's just G minor with a flat A, which gives that little Phrygian ethnic feel."



Reach will feature various new vehicles, though we only see this civilian flatbed truck, which is good at ramming. Many of the previous *Halo*s' steeds will appear, including the Mongoose and the Warthog

doesn't see mo-cap as a 'silver bullet' to solve problems, so animators will be adding to captures for more art-directed performances.

To add dramatic power to scenes, the team is motion-capturing voice actors' facial movements as they record their lines. The plan is to use what audio director and composer **Marty O'Donnell** refers to as 'faceover' – cutting together the best scenes in the way they like, and then getting the actors to come back again to perform for close-ups on particular lines they've already recorded. "To make sure we have a camera on their face for everything is cumbersome at this point in development, and you might not get the best voice take but the face might be right," he explains. "We can still make changes and continue to capture individual performances way deeper into the process if something doesn't seem quite right."

The quality of the animation is exemplified by a short cutscene marking the beginning of the second level we see. It's night and gently raining (though we don't see much of them, Reach's engine has been designed to create various dramatic weather effects). The sniper and player character are edging along a narrow ledge, stepping fluidly over rocks. The sequence is depicted from behind them as if with a handheld camera, a stylistic choice which the entire game will follow. "This is definitely a story in the trenches, so we wanted it to feel very real," says cinematic lead **Lee Wilson**. "We made the decision early to remove some of the helmets. Doing that dictated the style of how



Reach's character models are incredibly detailed, from the scratches on Emil's helmet to the mud on Kat's boots. Bungie's emphasis has been on lending them, as well as their enemies, as much variety and personality as possible





we would tell this story – we wanted to feel that these images were captured rather than shot."

This level has the player assault a Covenant-occupied military base, supported from a nearby high-point by the sniper. Using the active camo, Tung engages them one group at a time, dipping in and out of buildings and using lots of space. He also takes the opportunity to use an assassination move on a hapless Elite sentry. Pulled off by holding the melee button when behind a target, they replace the old instant one-hit kill with an animated, thirdperson one. It will also feature in multiplayer; in fact, according to Merrill, there's a good chance that *Reach* won't feature instant assassinations at all. "We're still playing with what's most satisfying," he says. It's down to showing the Spartans in action and allowing players to, in Merrill's words, 'shit-talk' their competitors as they take them out. "The alpha and internal beta will flush out exactly what the right combination is."

If there's any game in Bungie's back catalogue which keeps coming up during our day seeing *Reach*, it's *Combat Evolved*. From the resurrection of the Spirit dropship to the return of the Elite as principal antagonist, the team seems anxious to affirm that it's going back to base principles. In particular, this means that Reach's levels aim to feature the spatial breadth seen in some of that game's best – from Silent Cartographer to Flawless Cowboy. "We're intentionally bringing the game back to *Combat Evolved*'s degree of choice," says **Niles Sankey**, mission design lead. "We've set our sights on


To show off *Reach*'s new particle system, the team has created a delightful grenade which explodes with the sound of children cheering into a mesh of lights forming the Bungie logo

making environments that are bigger than we've ever put into a *Halo* game," continues Tung, "harkening back to *Combat Evolved* – the wide open vistas, the big pipe where the player can choose to go any number of directions, and really rewarding players for exploring."

Indeed, the first mission features a branching and looping path, so players may visit its sights in the order they wish. Supporting this is an engine tweak which supports a more powerful level of detail scaling, which has also enabled the higher-quality character models. The results are sweeping views of areas you can actually visit – in co-op, your friends can even be fighting there, and you'll see it all from a distance. The teleport which ensured players stuck together in all the previous games will be far less strict.

And there's another, even better, benefit: the battles will be bigger. The engineering team has doubled the number of AIs that can be fully active at a time to about 40, or 20 vehicles. And to situate these fights in a greater conflict, the new tech can depict battles far away with automated 'flocks' which convert into higher-resolution models as you near, flipping into scripted behaviours and then full AI as you get up close. "As you get the layers working it does feel like there's this world on fire, and that you're part of the battle," Opdahl explains.

How is this all happening on the same hardware as *Halo 3*? Lehto puts it down to better tools, better workflows, greater experience. "We are definitely bending the Xbox as far as it'll bend," he says. "It's getting a wider breadth of characters, vehicles, weapons, all effects and vistas and the environments. We don't shortchange the environments. We don't limit the player to an isolated area, and everything outside that is totally faked."

But you have to wonder whether a world which has so eagerly lapped up the highly scripted rollercoaster rides of *Modern Warfare 2* and *Uncharted 2* still cares about what Lehto still calls the 'evolved gameplay experience' which *Combat Evolved* introduced all those years ago. "The difference between the fully scripted experience, like *Uncharted*, or the organic experience you can receive in a *Halo* game speaks to its longevity," he maintains. And yet *Halo 3*'s campaign was criticised for being 'too short'. "Without giving anything away, there's certainly some cool stuff we're doing in *Reach* that will encourage people to replay the campaign," Tung counters. "There are going to be some big surprises in the campaign, maybe to address what you're talking about."

Fair enough. But we're still in thrall to the magic of *Halo*'s combat. And in *Reach* it'll be on a larger scale and in a wider world. Though it'd be easy to call what we've seen simply tweaks to experiences we've played before, one thing's already clear: as the culmination of all Bungie has created for the series, *Reach* has every chance of being the best *Halo* yet.

■ *For further details on* Halo: Reach*, including more Bungie interviews, see edge-online.com*


Though it covers the same chunk of *Halo* lore, *Reach* is not the game version of the book The Fall Of Reach, but will complement it


These comparison images show how *Reach*'s character modelling surpasses its predecessors'. It's down to Bungie's new level-of-detail scaling, which means higher-resolution textures and higher polygon counts all round


We see little of it during our demo, but *Reach* will feature plenty of rain, supported by dynamic effects which will, naturally, leave covered areas dry





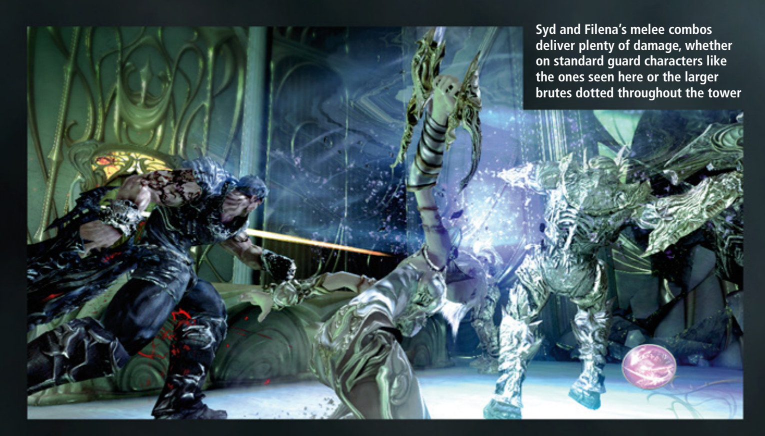
THE ODD COUPLE

Pete Doherty and Kate Moss. Nicolas Sarkozy and Carla Bruni. Lady and the Tramp. Syd and Filena? *Quantum Theory* strays from convention in many ways, but you can't help but like the game's central 'odd couple'. Lending a co-op dynamic to this singleplayer game, the AI-controlled Filena helps shrug off those ubiquitous *Gears Of War*-clone accusations.

"It's not two-player co-op – it's really Syd's game," explains bespectacled director **Makoto Shibata** as we chat at Tecmo's Tokyo HQ, his flowery T-shirt clashing quietly with his paisley trousers. "Filena's just part of the action. The original concept was to have one strong hero, and Filena is an extension of the hero's actions."

There are no grenades in Tecmo's first attempt at a thirdperson shooter; instead you get to lob a lady. Playing as beefcake Syd, you can duck'n'cover your way through half of the game, or you can jump into the action with your sidekick and take down the grotesque rival Gillskin and Nosferatu enemies at fistpoint. Filena prowls the battlefield, softening up the opposing ranks on your behalf, but when she's in range, you can hurl her at enemies with the L1 button for a top-down ambush (particularly useful for clearing gun turrets and the like) or a joint combo strike. These powerful attacks not only help dispatch the game's larger enemies, they also add a satisfying layer to the thirdperson shooter gameplay.

Beyond *Quantum Theory*'s lady-lobbing action, its shifting battlefield marks the biggest departure from the thirdperson shooter mould. The game is set inside a living tower – a blend of ornate, Gaudi-esque art nouveau and cancerous deformation – that Syd and Filena must scale. The tower is ill: the mysterious Diabolisis disease is causing it to mutate, and the effects are spreading to a human colony in the post-apocalyptic world outside. As such, paths are reconfigured in realtime as huge chunks of the landscape twist and buckle, a bit like a demonic version of the staircases in Hogwarts. Cover points bob in and out of existence, forcing the player to constantly keep moving, and the farther you get, the more restless the environments become.


Syd and Filena's melee combos deliver plenty of damage, whether on standard guard characters like the ones seen here or the larger brutes dotted throughout the tower

An early stage is set outside the tower: Syd has yet to meet Filena, and must simply duck behind walls and debris to take down the mutated ex-humans in his path. Headshots (not easy, given this build's clunky aiming reticule) are rewarded with a cranium-popping cutscene. But even this straightforward cover-based stage is made more engaging by the addition of dash and melee abilities, which enable you to rush enemies and splatter them with your fists. You'll have to combine these strategies to reach the top of the tower, as the moving-cover mechanic comes increasingly into play.

"In most thirdperson games, once you're behind cover, you're safe," says level-design head **Tsuyoshi Iuchi**. "The shifting battlefield takes that safety away. Once you get to the second half of the game, the levels move around more and more."

"There are times when the ground beneath you becomes vertical, and you have to grab on and shoot enemies," says

Lambasted by TGS-goers as a Gears Of War clone, Tecmo's Quantum Theory is nonetheless turning heads with a quirky concept and diverting duo



Shibata, who also directed the acclaimed *Project Zero* survival-horror series. "And in one stage, you ride on a kind of worm-type thing, which eventually starts to go up through the tower, and you're clinging on and shooting it, like a boss battle."

Quantum Theory's action approach reflects its creators' roots, bringing an arcadey feel to the thirdperson shooter genre. It's an ambitious project: Japan's history in the genre is limited, and the title runs on a bespoke engine developed in tandem with the game itself.

"We really started working on the engine and getting used to it on *Super Swing Golf*," laughs producer **Yasuo Egawa**, a veteran of Tecmo's Team Ninja development team since the launch of the now legendary *Dead Or Alive* and *Ninja Gaiden* franchises. "That was a Wii game,



TITLE: **QUANTUM THEORY**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (TEAM TACHYON)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH (JAPAN), TBA (UK, US)**

but we decided to make an engine that could port games between the Wii, PS3 or 360," explains Shibata. "So *Super Swing Golf* was the beginning of the engine. We then spent about two years improving that engine for *Quantum Theory*."

"The tools are still under development, even now," adds Egawa, who points out that the Xbox 360 version of *Quantum Theory* announced during our visit will be the first game to put the engine's flexibility to the test.

Shibata and Egawa explain that *Quantum Theory* is intended to provide a 'third pillar' for Tecmo: a franchise that, along with *DOA* and *Ninja Gaiden*, will find fans among western gamers. While Japan's population dwindles – estimates predict that the 128m populace will drop by a fifth by 2050 – Tecmo acknowledges that its game industry could too.

"The declining population is definitely influencing our business strategy," says Egawa. "But while the Japanese market's certainly shrinking, the number of people who play games is increasing. We see that as an opportunity. So over the last three or four years we've been trying to target customers who haven't bought Tecmo games before, specifically women.

"There are always peaks and troughs in the Japanese games industry. I have a feeling that Japanese developers as a whole are in a holding pattern. Originally you had small teams making *Final Fantasy* way back when. And those grew bigger, and the market has matured. Now we're looking at climbing the next hill, and the Japanese makers are preparing their resources to push towards the next peak."

"We want to put our existing franchises to good use, because those [are] popular overseas," adds Shibata. "We think *Quantum Theory* is another title that will be well received abroad."

While this all makes perfect sense, the niggling concern is that by second-guessing the kind of games westerners want to play, Tecmo Koei could dilute its



Yasuo Egawa, producer



Makoto Shibata, director



Chifumi Suzuki, CG designer



Daisuke Inari, art director

TECMO TECH

"Tecmo's usually pretty quick to pick up new technology, so we're definitely looking into Natal and the Sony wand and what we can do with them from a technical point of view," says veteran Tecmo producer Yasuo Egawa.

"Whether any products come out of that is up in the air. Aside from the Nintendo 64, GameCube and Virtual Boy, we've released games for every other console format, and even then we had been working on a GameCube version of *Ninja Gaiden* as a test. We're looking into 3D too, but we don't know what kind of a game we could make with it. Once we figure out the technology and how it will potentially affect gameplay, that's when a new product will come."

reputation as a key Japanese publisher-developer. Sure, the action element makes the game more fun, but will it appeal to the most hardened thirdperson shooter fans? And will Japanese players embrace a game that hasn't been made with their traditional tastes in mind?

"We've had consistent feedback from Japanese players at videogame shows," says Egawa. "Thirdperson shooters aren't so popular in Japan, but if we try to pitch the game in a way that a Japanese audience will better understand, we could alienate the western audience. It's a balancing act.

"For instance, the difficulty: at TGS, foreign players said the game should be harder, but Japanese people were having trouble figuring out the controls. And even those who were comfortable with the controls found the game too hard, though of course hardcore gamers had

> "Most thirdperson shooters are full of men; big, sweaty men. We thought we could bring a softer character to the genre"

no problem. We don't want to water it down for Japanese players – the core gameplay of aiming and shooting needs to stand on its own. But on top of that, we need to present it to the Japanese audience in a different way. We have to focus on story and characters, which a Japanese player might value more than a western player."

The 70-per-cent-complete PS3 build we play needs a lot of polish, and with its spring 2010 release already in sight, there's a chance it could go spectacularly wrong. Enemy AI, for example, is patchy right now. While some of your Gillskin foes dodge sniper blasts in a later level (the 15 stages in the ten-hour game are yet to be named), others sit barely concealed around a corner and take your hits without moving. In the first in-tower stage we play, the Nosferatu soldiers sometimes walk right past Syd, turn the other way after spotting him, get stuck on a staircase or, in the case of one oversized beast, stand in the middle of the arena and wait to be butchered. Clearly these flaws will have to be addressed if the game is to capture players in the same way as *Gears Of War* or *Uncharted*.

"The AI depends on the enemy type," responds character designer **Hiroyuki Yazaki**. "For instance, snipers obviously flee from close combat. Some enemies are stupid, so they'll attack without any strategy. But the further you progress, the more intelligent they become."

Framerate is another concern: even a small melee can send it crashing through the floor, severely hampering what is supposed to be a frenzied tempo. It will be optimised before release, naturally, and we hope similar attention is paid to the aiming mechanism, whose reticule currently jerks around the screen.

Still, the ideas are solid, and the scale of the game is sometimes giddying. The living tower has been brilliantly rendered, with intricate motifs adorning walls and columns that lead to lofty ceilings. Far from the dull brown common to many thirdperson shooters, *Quantum Theory* offers vibrant panes of stained glass, lush outdoor areas and delicately patterned armour. Though many of the textures have yet to be refined, the game offers a welcome variety of eye-catching environments.

"There were two reasons we picked an art nouveau influence," says art director **Daisuke Inari**. "First, it seemed to have an organic feel that suited the game's central concept of a living tower.



Early stages, before Syd enters the organic tower and meets Filena, are more straightforward – albeit with a slight twist: a powerful melee attack allows you jump out and literally punch enemies to pieces









The idea of a living battlefield breathes life into *Quantum Theory* and should make for some sophisticated set-pieces, with vertical shootouts against overgrown enemies such as this Gargantua. It's not so much duck'n'cover as dangle'n'shoot



ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

The Gillskin and Nosferatu factions that inhabit the tower aren't too chummy. According to Tecmo, in later stages the two races fight each other, giving the player the opportunity to make a cup of tea and come back to thinned-out odds. Their bodies are made of the same strange substance as the game's central organic tower, itself described by producer Egawa as a 'character' in the game; the origin of the mysterious minaret and its distorted denizens is the key plot point, unravelled through cutscenes and in-game banter between Syd and Filena.

The other reason was that the tower was supposed to feel otherworldly, like a place that human beings were never meant to enter, so we wanted an unusual style that we could warp into something weirder."

In utilitarian Tokyo, where the skyline is made up of prefab rectangles whose wafer-thin walls are designed to be knocked down within a couple of decades, the design team had trouble figuring out what an organic spire would actually be made from.

"It's not anything that exists in the real world," explains Inari. "Glass is probably the most similar existing material for reference. It was hard to explain this to the staff, and there were a lot of fights, because everyone was working with something different in mind. So I collected reference images to convey the look and feel. I happened to be on honeymoon in Barcelona, so I took photos of buildings that our artists could draw from. The Gaudi buildings were a big influence."

Egawa puts the game's unique visual style down to the female presence in the dev team – half of the art department are women. **Chifumi Suzuki**, who works on *Quantum Theory*'s CG design, feels women are better suited to the fine detail in the game, and Yazaki agrees, adding: "They've given Filena a feminine feel."

Filena has her own reasons for fighting her way to the top of the tower, and you can expect her and Syd to fall out somewhere along the line. She will become a playable character when the online modes are unveiled (along with the Gillskin and Nosferatu nasties), and just as in the campaign, she can be picked up by other players and thrown at enemies.

Egawa describes Filena as ninja-like: light and agile, though prone to damage. In the online team games, her death will mean game over for everyone (as it does in the campaign). She's certainly a lively character, giving chunky Syd a bit of reflected glamour and the game as a whole much of its Japanese sheen.

"Most thirdperson shooters are just full of men; big, sweaty men," says Yazaki. "So we thought we could bring a softer character into the genre. We're Tecmo – we're good at female characters!

"One of the early concepts was that Filena couldn't walk on her own, and Syd had to carry her. But we decided she had to not look out of place on the battlefield; she had to look like she could fight."

Syd also went through several design changes before arriving at the slightly clichéd brawn-bundle he is now, a look intended to attract western gamers.

In an effort to avoid distracting players from the spectacle on the battlefield, the HUD has been kept refreshingly minimal. In the top left of the screen, a small display shows Syd's life gauge and ammo; an icon on the bottom right flashes when Filena is in range for a combo attack; and using the D-pad to equip a new weapon will bring up a discrete display of your arsenal in the bottom left.

Syd can carry three guns at a time. In the build we play, they all look fairly similar and cover the basics: blaster, shotgun, rocket launcher, sniper rifle and so on. These will be expanded to 18 types, with some as-yet-unannounced 'special' weapons to be found later in the game.

While this build is far from perfect, it's difficult not to be swayed by the team's enthusiasm for this formidable project. Yazaki is so loopy about thirdperson shooters that he says he's graced the top online ranking on *Gears Of War*, while Suzuki cites *GTA* and *Infamous* as her thirdperson sprees of choice.

"As long as it's a solid thirsperson shooter with good game mechanics, we're not so worried about aspects that are less in keeping with western styles," says Shibata. "If the game's strong, that should carry it. Rather than making a different type of game, we're keeping a core that might appeal to western gamers and putting new things on top. After all, it is a thirdperson shooter, and we've no intention of hiding that."



Felina adds an extra strategic layer to *Quantum Theory*'s gameplay, allowing the player to keep behind cover and send her into the fray instead. Be sure to revive her fast if she dies, or it'll be game over


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ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



With two new projects in development, the man who wanted to revolutionise Japanese gaming is finally coming to terms with a changing industry

"You need to sacrifice things," sighs **Yoshiki Okamoto**, president and CEO of Japanese developer Game Republic, and the veteran designer sometimes referred to as the spiritual father of *Street Fighter II*. The 'thing' in question is quality, rather worryingly, and the reason why the man who helped introduce the world to the joys of a well-timed Dragon Punch is sounding faintly weary is that he's recalling a day on which – presumably, at least – he very nearly died of a heart attack. It was the day he learned that, mid-development, Sony had shifted Game Republic's *Genji 2* from the comforting twilight of the PS2 marketplace to the brutal, early-morning glare of PS3, and the occasion – Sony's very first announcement party for its new console – couldn't have been more disconcerting. Casually running his eye down a catalogue of the mysterious machine's forthcoming software, Okamoto saw his own game listed: flattering, perhaps, but also terrifying. "We were stunned, thinking: 'Are you serious?'" Okamoto winces at the thought of it all. "A *launch* title…"

Built, for the most part, with no PS3 tools or devkits, *Genji 2* wasn't a huge success by any standards. Equally, the company's follow-up, 2007's dreamy pixie-brawler *Folklore*, while colourful and endearing, was far too restrained in its implementation and conflicted in its design to gather much more than a cult following (a frustration-proof elite, drawn to its Christmas-ornament colour scheme and willing to overlook its willful shortcomings). Two games into a new – and frighteningly expensive – hardware generation, the situation was undeniably rather bleak. It seemed like there might be trouble ahead for the development studio that Okamoto had left Capcom to form – the company he had initially hoped would help revitalise the Japanese game industry.

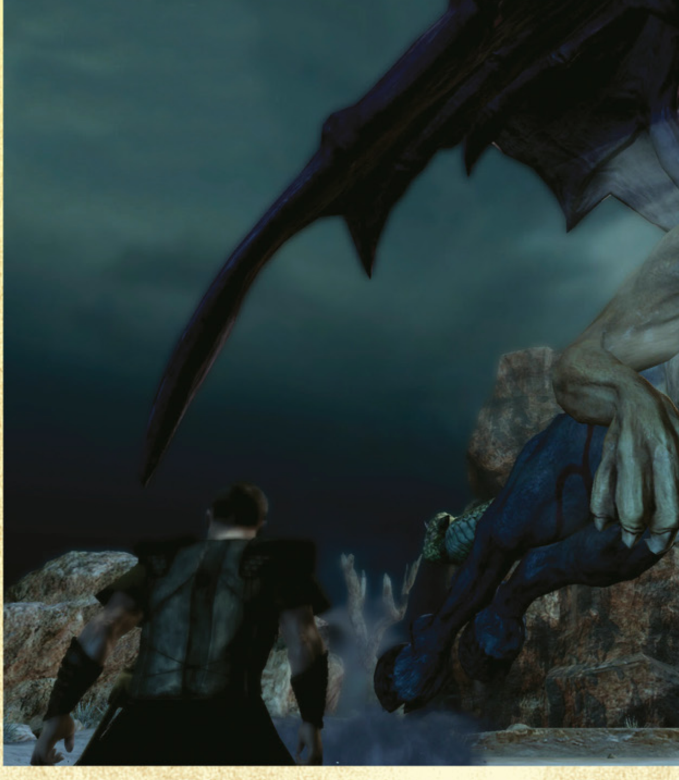
Fast-forward to 2010, however, and Okamoto might have reason to feel a little more positive about things. After a period of fairly frantic expansion, Game Republic has levelled out at 300 employees spread over three sites, covering Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka. More importantly, the company's various teams are hard at work on two major new projects, all of which suggests a canny developer hedging its bets. After the failures of two Sony exclusives, both are multiplatform titles, and both target different aspects of the marketplace, too: the first takes on a crowd-pleasing cinematic tie-in with a distinctly epic bent, while the second is an original IP that brings the rich traditions of Japanese game design sharply into focus.

Clash Of The Titans, as the name suggests, was never destined to be a small-scale undertaking. Built around the forthcoming retread of the Ray Harryhausen fidget-fingered classic, in which stop-motion heavyweights culled from classical literature took on the combined forces of Laurence Olivier and Tim Pigott-Smith, Game Republic's hack and slasher transforms the myth of Perseus into a meaty story of big monsters and even bigger weapons. Best described as a traditional action-adventure game with a quest component that allows for gentle exploration elements (fans of *Folklore* will know to prepare themselves for a fairly shallow take on yomping through the wilderness), the spine of the experience is the gristly swathe you carve through increasingly monumental enemies, as you work your way towards taking down a series of suitably gigantic bosses.





The *Clash Of The Titans* development team has been granted a good deal of creative breathing room to turn a two-hour film into a ten-hour game. As you might expect, that involves the design of new monsters and ways of finishing them off



The ever-expanding mythological arsenal is the key to the game's appeal, and Game Republic wrings a lot of spectacle from the sheer scale of the weapons at your disposal as you rhythmically chain together devastating attacks. "I would define it as very Game Republic style," says **Tomoaki Nanjo**, a producer for Bandai Namco Games, which is publishing *Clash Of The Titans*. "The Titans fight with legendary weapons that you are going to loot after you defeat them. When you hit those gigantic bosses with some of the heavier God Class weapons, it really feels good. Since there are more than 80 of these weapons, we think that people will have a lot of fun trying to collect all of them."

While the prospect of *Pokémon* with gigantic knives suggests that perhaps we really do live in interesting times, the concept may well provide *Clash Of The Titans* with a compulsive depth. There's certainly enough breadth to go around: looted weapons range from long-range items like bows, to more up-close monster-mashers such as swords and chunky hammers, and they can be gradually upgraded and swapped in and out of play as the situation demands. While the flexibility, vigour and lasting appeal of the combat system is hard to judge based on what's been revealed so far, focus attacks certainly bring the game's huge weapons and elaborate visual rewards together in an enjoyable piece of risk/reward design; your hero concentrates all his power into one move – rendering him immobile in the process – before unleashing an earth-shattering blow, gambling all the while that the intended target won't have simply moved out of range during charging. Elsewhere, as if the licence wasn't enough of an indication of Game Republic's western focus, a second playable character is also available for co-op.

The team is adamant that it's been allowed far more room to manoeuvre within the fiction than most licensed games allow for.

"We had to stick to the movie's world and style, but beyond that we were able to do almost whatever we've wanted to"



Clash Of The Titans' bestiary should present a fascinating – and rare – opportunity to see characteristically western and eastern design sensibilities coming together. At this stage, it's a meeting of minds that has created two-headed dogs and excessively large hammers, but we're hopeful something truly innovative may come from it

"To be honest, we were given a lot of creative freedom on this one," says Nanjo. "We designed our game systems and new content quite freely. Of course, we had to really stick to the movie's world and style, but beyond that we were able to do almost whatever we've wanted to. As the movie lasts 'only' two hours, there isn't enough story or monsters to go around, so we worked with the original scenario writer to expand the content with new stuff, creating new original episodes and new monsters."

If *Clash Of The Titans* is a widescreen reinvention of western mythology, *Majin: The Fallen Realm*, Game Republic's latest original IP, focuses on the eastern tradition of magical demon gods in order to summon up a game that blends its design influences with abandon. It conjures memories of Fumito Ueda's back catalogue, the many traditions of *Zelda*, and even anime like Hayao Miyazaki's Laputa, to colour in the simple story of a nimble thief and the giant monster he frees from a life of servitude.

The game's windswept columns, broken arches and sputtering torches make for some







Phoning it in

Asked if he sees Game Republic following in the footsteps of Level-5, Okamoto suggests a more nuanced approach. "I don't really think we are thinking of becoming such a major company," he muses. "However, I'm very interested in their online strategy. I'm interested in developing our business towards platforms like mobile phones such as the iPhone, or even online console services like Xbox Live or WiiWare, with small games to download." Game Republic's PSN output to date has been somewhat mixed – *Dark Mist* and *Toy Home* may be fairly simplistic offerings, but the developer's assured sense of colour and style has earned the games a decent fanbase regardless.

TITLE: **CLASH OF THE TITANS**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **GAME REPUBLIC**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010**

really obvious associations, as does the mismatched partnership of the spindly human hero – the thief – and the towering Majin (rendered oddly lovable by the plants and vegetables sprouting from his back), but Game Republic's focus is far more direct, and its action a lot more immediate, than anything found in the rarefied worlds of *Ico* or even *Shadow Of The Colossus*. Combat looks both kinetic and thuddingly brutal, while puzzle elements have the short room-to-room attention span of one of Hyrule's later dungeon levels.

And throughout, *Majin* looks likely to mint a lot of enjoyment from the interaction between the two lead characters. In terms of the combat, it comes down to balance, with the player-controlled thief fast but vulnerable, while his AI accomplice is lumbering yet potentially devastating, capable of toppling walls on enemies if the thief lures them into position with taunts. The puzzles revealed so far often focus on clever incidents of separation, however, with the Majin providing a means for the thief to access hard-to-reach areas where he must then tackle enemies unaided. Given that the thief's sword alone will never be enough to comprehensively subdue foes, he must rely instead on the use of the environment and its many potentials for deadly traps.

While the Majin might seem to have some obvious – and rather recent – gaming precedents, his inclusion in *The Fallen Realm* apparently stems from Okamoto's wish for the player to experience the feeling of trying to deal with a five-year-old child, along with all the charm and frustration that process involves. Tenacious rather than smart, this particular colossus requires the player to focus a lot of energy on communication. And although he's powerful, the huge beast is far from invincible, and unlikely to last very long if attacked by too many enemies at once. While it's hard to imagine stealth components slotted into a game in which one of the principal characters is the size of a fairly well-appointed outbuilding, it suggests another, more unpredictable side to a fairly traditional blend of fighting and puzzle-solving: a need for a tactical approach to situations that goes beyond the block-pulling and simple double-team attacks of many less imaginative combat systems.





Yoshiki Okamoto's career includes work on Capcom classics *Street Fighter II* and *Resident Evil*, and Konami shooter legend *Time Pilot*

Perhaps the most welcome element of *Majin*, however, is the chance to see Game Republic fully in control of the visual design. Regardless of how much creative leeway Legendary Pictures may afford Okamoto's artists with the expanded bestiary of *Clash Of The Titans*, the company's second project is by far the more interesting aesthetic proposition, the thief's spiky top-knot of hair lending him an exotic charisma, while the Majin's leafy hide is the perfect counterpoint to the game's slickly sinister enemies, who appear to be made from shimmering blobs of petroleum.

While it would be easy to assume that, with its lack of a recognisable licence and its



Team Japan

Okamoto is adamant that many of the hurdles facing Japan's game-makers come down to money. "If you want to compete on the world stage, you need more finances. I don't think we necessarily have to go to Montreal to make games: we need to come out with an engine that is competitive enough. Today we have various teams working for Bandai Namco. Their development engine and ours are different. I'm sure they have some coming from outside, while others have been made in-house. This only pushes the development costs up. I believe we need only one engine in Japan for the entire industry. We could even imagine building a Team Japan company that would be in charge of developing such technologies, financed by the industry big names. But the reality is different. We are still very much divided, and moving in various ways. This is how I've felt for some time on this issue. It could be bigger than Japan. It could be Asia. It could even be SCE." He pauses, perhaps thinking back to the development of *Genji 2*. "I'm sure it would have been a big help if Sony had such an engine ready in preparation for the launch of the PS3."

reliance on a predominantly home-grown design lineage, *Majin* is as tailored for the eastern market as *Clash Of The Titans* is for the west, it's tempting to suggest that the Japanese games *Majin* borrows most heavily from – the *Zelda*s and the *Ico*s – have all been selected due, in part, to their success in America and Europe. There's little of the patient toil of a *Monster Hunter*, for example, or the self-involvement and low-key perspective of a *Persona* in *Majin's* rock-toppling world – a sign, perhaps, that the relatively poor reception of titles such as *Folklore* has forced Game Republic to adopt a more global perspective.

For Okamoto, it all comes down to the reason he started Game Republic in the first place. "The Japanese games industry was not healthy," he suggests, thinking back to his time working with Capcom in the early years of the century. "I was convinced that little chance was given for new games to appear. I was told to make sequels to our franchises like *Rockman* [*Mega Man*] or *Biohazard* [*Resident Evil*] or *Street Fighter*, but I did not join the games industry to spend my time making

> "I was told to make sequels to franchises like Street Fighter, but I did not join the industry to spend my time on sequels"









While *Majin's* dreamy aspect and mismatched heroes call to mind *The Last Guardian*, Game Republic's title seems to be a far more direct blend of action and puzzling

sequels. I was convinced that the industry would not get better that way. I really believed we needed to make new things so that a new dynamic could take root, and I didn't feel I would be given that chance."

Leaving Capcom and setting up his own company has forced Okamoto to view the Japanese design landscape perhaps more dispassionately than some of his contemporaries. "I don't think the Japanese industry is dead or dying," he smiles. "I think, however, that our industry has undergone a very specific evolution that could make it difficult for our games to have any appeal outside the country. It's this so-called Galapagos process. Just like you would find animals that live nowhere else on those islands, you can find games that don't have any echoes other than here in Japan. And if you make games for Japan, they won't sell anywhere else. The problem is also that these specific Galapagos animals have been able to thrive because there were no predators. And that's true here too, since most of the overseas games can't make a significant impact on the Japanese markets – say, the FPS, for instance. We are still making RPGs."

Okamoto's solution, as his two latest projects suggest, is a global approach to business that quietly separates him from many of his competitors. While plenty of Japanese studios are eager to make more westernised games, there aren't many currently working on film tie-in products for the major



Hollywood studios. "My personal opinion is that we need to go overseas," Okamoto says. "We need to appeal to overseas markets more – even if that means we have to forget about our domestic market. The challenge is the difference in time and money spent on development between Japan and the west. If you look at a company like Blizzard, it is like a world apart: you have a hard time seeing how and where you are able to compete against such giants."

It's a singularly stark appraisal, but Okamoto has a few ideas for how to make competition possible. And although some of them are both too wide-reaching and too unlikely – "All companies in Japan could get together and make one single development engine that would deliver the full potential of the PS3 and the Xbox 360" – Game Republic's current strategy of carefully considered balance is beginning to look increasingly promising. Combining the risks of original IP with some reliable licences and mixing big-budget boxed products with quirky downloadable games such as the PSN's *Dark Mist* and *Toy Home* could mean that, like the complementary duos at the heart of both of its latest projects, Game Republic is as well placed as any thirdparty developer to face whatever the capricious marketplace wants to fling at it.

Despite his famous successes, there's a sense that Okamoto remains a bit of an oddity: a brilliant producer of videogames, with a list of credits that rivals – and occasionally mirrors – those of Shinji Mikami and Hideo Kojima, but without quite their superstar influence or immediate name recognition. In the past, perhaps, he's been happy to simply let his games speak for him; in the future, he clearly hopes it's his company that will do the talking.



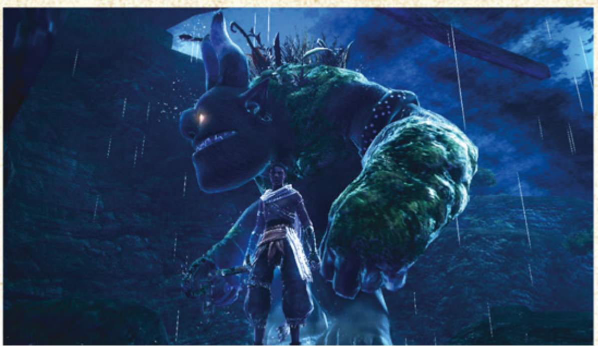
Expect switch puzzles by the shedload as the thief picks his way through the world of *Majin*. While little has been shown of the game so far, Game Republic's distinctive approach to enemy design and high-colour environments is already evident

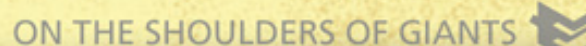












Me and my Majin

Daisuke Uchiyama, *Majin: The Fallen Realm*'s producer at Bandai Namco, offers insight into its origins and mechanics.

What's the core concept behind the game?
It is very simple: 'no Majin, no life'. This means that the human character can't hope to survive without his Majin. Here, the teamwork between both characters is very critical.

How does the game work mechanically?
It is basically an adventure action game – the very agile but weak human and his powerful but so slow – if not heavy – Majin friend. It's all about managing the strong points and weaknesses of each character to overcome every difficulty. While fighting an army of the darkness, you need to use your head to solve every puzzling situation that is featured in every place in the game.

Where did the team look for inspiration for the game's visual style?
We had this long process of trial and error in getting the visuals and the world that you can see now. It was nothing easy! We wanted something new, original and had to come up with various uses of shaders. I often think about it like trying to put a world of silhouettes into real hi-definition visuals.

How does the lead character communicate with his companion?
Imagine you have two beings that are very different. One is giving some rough instruction that the other one tries to interpret, asking himself: "What should I do?" So, obviously while there are times when it goes smoothly, there will be other times when it won't go so well. We are in the process of tuning Majin's AI right now. So, it's up to us to decide how well he's going to understand the situation or his human friend. It is something I was really excited to work on during the course of the game's development.

How do the characters work together?
Well, for instance, imagine you have to go through a very heavy door and the human character can't possibly lift it. Here, Majin's power comes in handy. But, what if the door is locked on the other side? The human would need to go and quickly unlock it while the Majin would lift it open. This is a very simple example, but that's the kind of thing you'll need to do.

Is the Majin character going to evolve during the adventure?
That's another aspect of the character that we are working on right now. While this isn't final, I'd say he may evolve through several factors, from strength to other abilities, for example, and through the recovery of lost memories.

TITLE: **MAJIN: THE FALLEN REALM**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **GAME REPUBLIC**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010**

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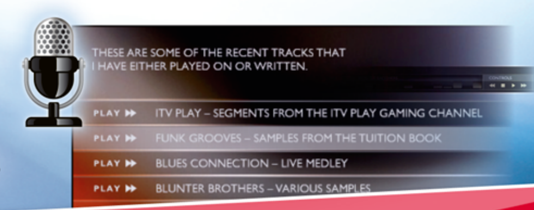
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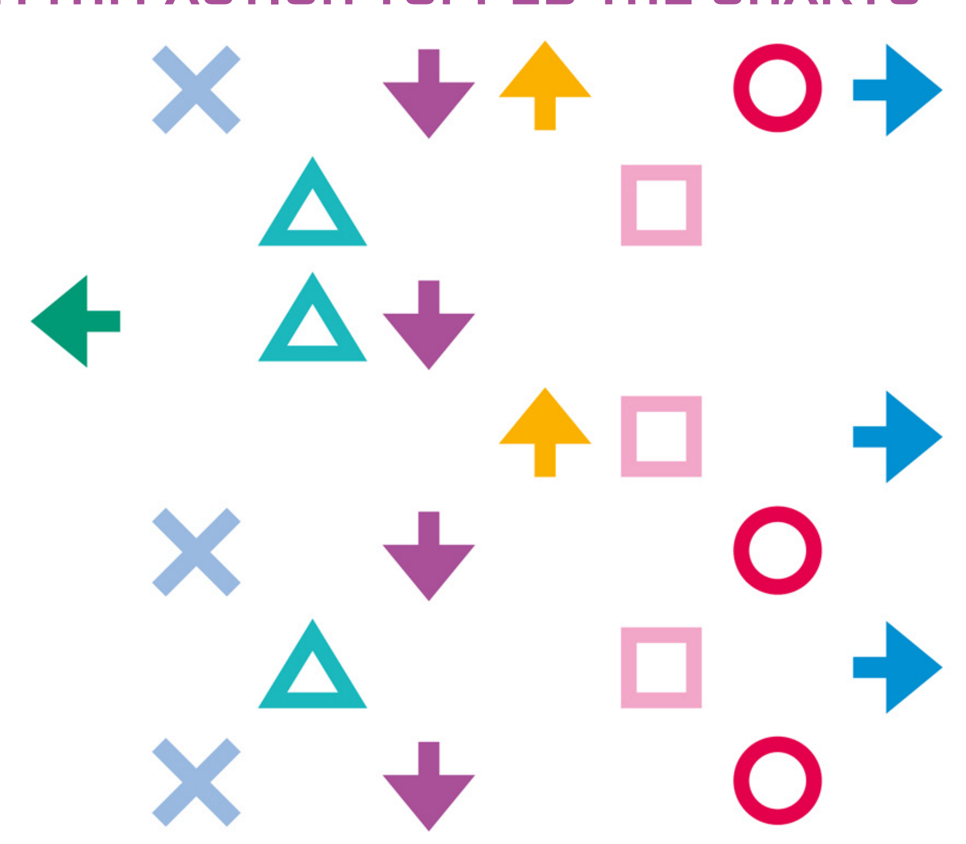
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RHYTHM ATTRACTION

THE RISE OF THE BEATMATCHING BUSINESS: HOW RHYTHM-ACTION TOPPED THE CHARTS



In the history of videogames, no genre has infiltrated the public consciousness quite so quickly or unexpectedly as music games. Go back five years, and rhythm gaming was an ultra-niche enthusiasm, a Japanese-dominated realm of breathtaking arcade performances on dazzling specialist machines, finding its way into the living rooms of only the most dedicated western importer. Skilled rhythm gamers stood alongside 2D-shooter obsessives as ambassadors from a foreign culture.

Conversely, today's rhythm gamer has millions of faces: male, female, teenager, parent, banker, student, real-life rockstar. Had anyone told *Guitar Hero* developer Harmonix in 1999 that North Americans would spend $1.19 billion on music games during just one month in 2008, delight would surely have been dwarfed by disbelief. But this meteoric rise to popularity and profitability has had a fatalistic tinge. Year on year, sales of music games have plummeted at an even more accelerated rate than global recession can account for. There's a feeling that we may have seen the genre's peak. It's difficult, in fact, to imagine that people will ever buy almost two million rhythm games in a single month again, as they did with *Guitar Hero 3* in November 2007.

Rhythm-action may not have been born in the deafening, hyperactive world of the Japanese arcade – the genre's true genesis can be found somewhere between 1978's Simon, an electronic pattern game that was a staple of '80s households, and *PaRappa the Rapper* in 1996 – but that is undoubtedly where it matured. Konami's Games & Music Division, later renamed the Bemani division in a nod to its breakthrough game, was the original pioneer of peripheral-led music gaming. 1997's *Beatmania*, with its five keys and imitation record turntable, became an unexpected success in the arcade, and the company soon found itself at the centre of a national phenomenon.

The late '90s saw the genre expand from a few experimental dance mats and pattern-matching programs to a broad selection of machines with a catalogue of hundreds of hyperactive J-Pop songs, all under the impetus of a single division of a single publisher. Before 2000, Konami's Bemani division had released *GuitarFreaks*, *DrumMania*, *Dance Dance Revolution* and *Pop'n Music*, the iconic music-game franchises that are responsible for the genre as we know it – and which still define it in Japan to this day. The scrolling note charts, coloured prompts and peripherals that define modern rhythm-gaming are all Konami creations. Under the skin of every music game made since 1997 beats a Bemani-engineered heart.

Japanese rhythm-action was and is competitive and fiercely challenging, with fast-paced music and fractional hit-windows for notes. Its appeal generally has little to do with the actual songs, and everything to do with the primal twitch-gaming rush of matching impossibly fast patterns, and the pleasing tricks that light and sound play with your brain chemistry. In those terms, Bemani's early output and its hundreds of updates, expansions and home-console versions are perfectly beautiful videogames. As your mastery grows, the note charts come to be more instinctual than language or thought – and you're able to reproduce the patterns with ever-increasing fluidity and precision. It's a pure chemical thrill.

But as Konami filled arcades with second, third, fifth and ninth mixes into the early 2000s, the games themselves remained largely unchanged. A rapidly expanding song selection and ever-increasing difficulty levels kept the genre popular among the rhythm-action hardcore, providing more and more opportunity for ostentatious feats of dexterity, but the Bemani division's talents were devoted to rapid expansion rather than further innovation. It wasn't the dominant Japanese music-gaming culture that inspired the genre's western pioneers at Harmonix to move from 'interactive music creativity applications' into videogame design.

"It began with *Parappa The Rapper*," says Harmonix's founder and CEO, **Alex Rigopulos**. "There were already some rhythm-action games around at that point, like Virtual Music's *Quest For Fame*, but we didn't find them particularly compelling. When we played *Parappa* for the first time, though, we were struck by how fun it was, and at that point we started thinking seriously about new ways to merge music and gameplay. The release of *Parappa* was a life-changing event for me – it wasn't the first rhythm-action game, but it was the first great one, and it altered Harmonix's trajectory."

Indeed, Harmonix was inspired more by mainstream Japanese-developed music games' limitations than their commercial success. "On the one hand, it was inspirational to see music performance simulation games become successful in Japan in the late '90s – they helped us to further appreciate the potential for videogames as a vehicle to bring music-making to non-musicians," Rigopulos explains. "On the other hand, we found the Bemani family of games in particular to be sorely deficient in a number of key respects: the gameplay was shallow, the visual design was uninspired, the music selection and sound quality was poor…

"WE FOUND THE BEMANI FAMILY OF GAMES TO BE DEFICIENT IN A NUMBER OF KEY RESPECTS… WE SAW THIS AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE MUSIC GAMES TO THE NEXT LEVEL"

THE FACE OF MUSIC GAMING: JAPAN











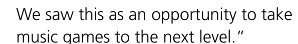
GUITARFREAKS/ DRUMMANIA V6 BLAZING
***GuitarFreaks* and *DrumMania* were always ahead of their time, enabling players to link up for band-based play as early as 1999. The three-button guitar peripheral is nothing on *Guitar Hero*, but *DrumMania*'s full drum kit is enormously satisfying to play around with.**

TAIKO NO TATSUJIN 13
Namco's universally popular drumming game is ubiquitous, showing up not only in gaming arcades but in shopping centres, which are usually dominated by UFO catchers and Purikura photo machines. Its simple interface and uber-kawaii presentation have made it an extremely popular game.

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION X
***Dance Dance Revolution* is the only Bemani machine to make a significant impact outside of Japan – it's perhaps as famous abroad as it is at home. Watching a champion play two mats on Expert simultaneously with all four limbs is one of the greatest spectacles in gaming.**

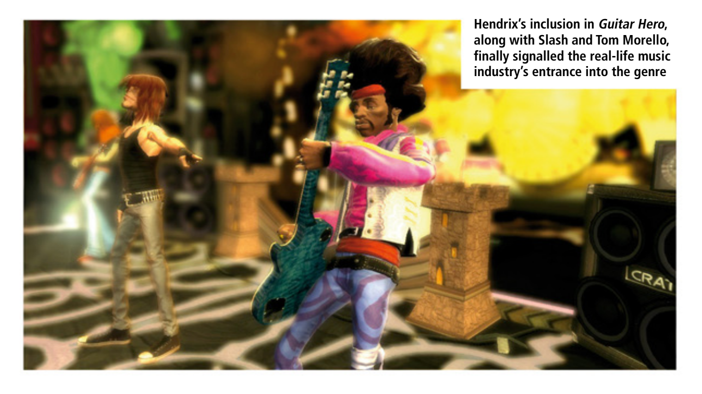
JUBEAT RIPPLES
The most weirdly beautiful machine to be found in arcades, *Jubeat Ripples* is the second iteration of Konami's only new rhythm-action machine in eight years. The 16 touch-sensitive screens bloom on contact with your fingers, giving expert players the appearance of a crazed, flailing octopus.

BEATMANIA IIDX 17: SIRIUS
***Sirius* is the 37th *Beatmania* arcade cabinet to be released in Japan. Although the original series came to an end in 2002 with *Beatmania The Final*, Konami subsequently introduced a new series of machines, *IIDX*, with two decks and an additional two keys, to the delight of many an armchair DJ.**



We saw this as an opportunity to take music games to the next level."

That next level was *Frequency*, still considered by some to be the purest and best example of the rhythm-action genre. It took the basic principles of Bemani games and wove them across a delirious musical landscape of quirky techno, esoteric rock and relentless drum'n'bass, strewing individual notes across a light-latticed neon tunnel that represents the constituent parts of a song. In *Frequency*, you aren't an accessory to the music, you're part of it, unleashing overlapping waves of sound by switching between its different instrument tracks until the entire arrangement pulses in unison.

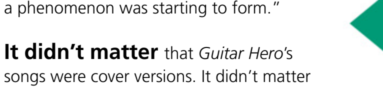


Hendrix's inclusion in *Guitar Hero*, along with Slash and Tom Morello, finally signalled the real-life music industry's entrance into the genre

"I TYPED 'GUITAR HERO' INTO YOUTUBE AND IT RETURNED HUNDREDS OF VIDEOS OF PEOPLE PLAYING. IT WAS THEN THAT I KNEW A PHENOMENON WAS STARTING TO FORM"

Frequency famously sold barely any copies, and its equally accomplished sequel *Amplitude* couldn't do much to build upon its limited success. "*Frequency* and *Amplitude* were both really fun games to play – for people who bothered to give them a try," Rigopulos laments. "But those games were… strange. The visual interface was unfamiliar and forbidding to the uninitiated. There was no easy narrative metaphor for people to grasp on to, no aspirational element. And the soundtrack featured a lot of club music that lacked mainstream appeal."

Guitar Hero was the turning point for western rhythm-action, incorporating the dominant musical culture into the instinctive twitch-gaming principles of *Frequency*, *Amplitude* and Japanese rhythm gaming. *Guitar Hero* gave western players something beyond the pattern-matching thrill – it referenced rock music's aspirational quality and, above all, the wider region's musical tastes. At first, few predicted that it would break out beyond a cult userbase, but sales grew and grew, driven largely by word of mouth. "Normally, games have their big sales spike just before Christmas, and then sales steadily taper off thereafter," says Rigopulos, who was arguably as surprised as anyone by the game's early success. "I had just learned that the opposite was happening with *Guitar Hero* – sales were continuing to grow every month. This prompted me one day to type 'guitar hero' into YouTube's search field, which returned hundreds of videos that people had made of themselves playing the game. It was at that moment that I knew a phenomenon was starting to form."



It didn't matter that *Guitar Hero*'s songs were cover versions. It didn't matter

that the peripheral looked like an absurd toy next to Japan's expensive arcade cabinets. Harmonix's obvious passion and commitment, apparent in everything from the art style to the loading screens, endeared it to every rock fan who laid eyes upon it.

"It started with the music," says **Brian Bright**, project director of the *Guitar Hero* series at its current curator, Neversoft. "The music used in rhythm games before *Guitar Hero* was mostly Japanese pop. The Huang brothers [at RedOctane] were keen enough to recognise that the guitar controller, which was being used in Konami's games, when combined with popular rock'n'roll could make people feel like they were guitar gods on a stage. It's that feeling of being a rock star, of experiencing the music you love in a new way, that made *Guitar Hero* the sensation it has become."

As an emboldened Harmonix threw itself into *Rock Band*, an obscenely ambitious project that would previously have given any sane publisher palpitations, *Guitar Hero* took on a life of its own. It may not have been a creative breakthrough, but the series' switch to Neversoft and Activision for *Guitar Hero III* was as significant a moment in the evolution of the genre as any other. *GHIII* marked the point at which *Guitar Hero* became a brand, as the endorsement and inclusion of real-life guitar gods and their fully-licensed tracks, a truly crossplatform publisher and a generous advertising budget propelled it into the mainstream.

"I think *Guitar Hero III* was the perfect storm," says Bright. "It was the first major music game that released on all four console platforms simultaneously. The wireless Les Paul guitars were another major shot in the arm for sales. It was a solid game, and for the first time in the series the majority of the music was comprised of master recordings. All of that benefited its rise to pop culture overkill."

The revolution that began with *Guitar Hero* was fully realised by *Rock Band* and, later, *Guitar Hero World Tour*. "When we originally laid out the plans for *Rock Band*, it was just insanely ambitious, in a what-the-hell-are-you-smoking sort of way," recalls Rigopulos. "In a relatively short amount of time, we had to develop tons of new technology and gameplay, much of it unproven; we knew nothing about hardware development, but we had to learn how to make the instruments and manufacture them in the millions; we had to convince the record companies and artists to start licensing us original multi-track master recordings – and not just for the game disc, but for a never-ending flow of DLC thereafter. And then we were going to put this whole thing in a huge box and would have to launch it at retail priced at nearly $200, which was an unheard-of price point for a videogame." Two years on, the financial viability of selling hundreds of pounds' worth of plastic instruments to western gamers is no longer in question.

The Japanese music-gaming scene, meanwhile, barely seems to have changed since the *Beatmania* boom of the late '90s. The big names that flash and blare their presence in the music-game corner of the typical arcade have been the same



Pop'n Music **is like a supercute** ***Beatmania*** **with an intriguing interface of nine huge buttons**

for a decade – *Beatmania*, *GuitarFreaks*, *Pop'n Music*, *Dance Dance Revolution* – with only their ever-more-convoluted subtitles to distinguish them from their forebears. There have been 39 distinct *Beatmania* cabinets in 12 years, but Konami's only truly new foray into the genre since 1999 is *Jubeat*, a dreamily hi-def and genuinely innovative game with 16 touch-sensitive screens. Despite location tests in the US and Europe, though, it doesn't look likely to make it outside of Japan in big numbers.

A lack of competition is probably accountable for this stagnation in the country that pioneered rhythm-action – Konami's current competitors are limited to Namco's *Taiko No Tatsujin* and Taito's *Music GunGun*, both of which are marketed at casual players rather than beat-matching hobbyists. But there's also a distinct impression that the Bemani division, the unseen pioneer of one of the world's most successful game genres, has been sidelined in Konami's larger corporate strategy. The publisher's *Rock Revolution*, released for 360, PS3 and Wii (to mostly awful reviews) and featuring its own guitar, microphone and drum kit peripherals, wasn't even made by the Bemani team. Despite repeated requests for comment made both directly to Konami in Japan and through its European arm, the company refused to offer a voice for this article, and the genre inventor's refusal to talk hardly inspires confidence in its future output.

Rock Band and *Guitar Hero* have yet to make big inroads into the Japanese market, largely due to differences in gaming culture that make at-home music gaming more difficult to market. "I'd certainly love to bring *Rock Band* to Japan



***Beatmania*'s basic background visuals have barely evolved since the game's introduction in 1997, though more and more Japanese artists now provide official music videos to replace the rather abstract, rhythm-reactive visualiser graphics**

THE FACE OF MUSIC GAMING: THE WEST



GUITAR HERO 5
Including *Guitar Hero: Metallica* and other such spin-offs, *Guitar Hero 5* is the tenth game in the series, and Neversoft's fifth. Though the series' quality has barely ever dipped in all that time, it's possible to have too much of a good thing.



THE BEATLES: ROCK BAND
The moment when The Beatles – who are, as Rigopulos puts it, the "biggest band in the history of bands" – agreed to put their name to a *Rock Band* game was the point at which rhythm-action gained true credence in the music world.

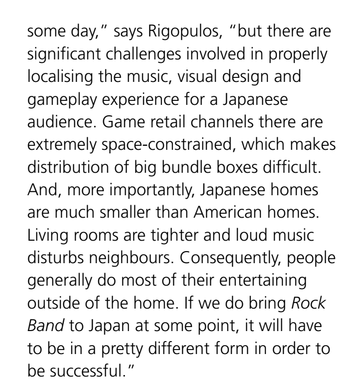


BAND HERO
***Band Hero* isn't quite a part of the *Guitar Hero* series, but uses all of its architecture. Activision's attempt to marry pop music with band-based gameplay is intended to expand music gaming's audience yet further.**



DJ HERO
There were fears that it would merely be a cash-in, but FreeStyleGames' experiment in the world of pretend instruments is a fully featured, well realised rhythm-action title that understands the chemical impulses at the heart of the genre. Sadly, its sales currently don't reflect its quality.





some day," says Rigopulos, "but there are significant challenges involved in properly localising the music, visual design and gameplay experience for a Japanese audience. Game retail channels there are extremely space-constrained, which makes distribution of big bundle boxes difficult. And, more importantly, Japanese homes are much smaller than American homes. Living rooms are tighter and loud music disturbs neighbours. Consequently, people generally do most of their entertaining outside of the home. If we do bring *Rock Band* to Japan at some point, it will have to be in a pretty different form in order to be successful."



Rock Band **harnessed the unifying power of both music and videogames to help rhythm gaming – once a personal experience – become more social**

That's perhaps a sentiment that has wider applications for the genre as a whole. *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*'s disc-based updates are not selling at anything like the pace of their forebears, while new forays such as *DJ Hero* have had their sales expectations dramatically dashed at retail. "As far as sales exceeding *GHIII*'s in the future, only time will tell, but it's a tall order," says Bright. "I think user-created content is key to the evolution. If you can't create or edit licensed music due to copyright laws then you're limited to pretending to play someone else's music. I think the key is to create music, but make it compelling to create, so the game is in the creation, not the playback."

"User-generated content will be absolutely critical to the ongoing success of the genre, I think," agrees Rigopulos. "To be clear, though, when I talk about 'users' in this context, I don't necessarily mean end-users or players. I'm talking about a huge community of power-users – skilled music creators – providing their music to the audience. The launch of the Rock Band Network will be our next 'defining moment'."

If rhythm gaming needs to take a 'different form' in order to maintain its success, the Rock Band Network is certainly going in the right direction, giving musicians the opportunity to offer their music to fans without using Harmonix as a note-charting middleman. This could potentially widen the selection of *Rock Band* tracks, and there would appear to be an appetite for it. Despite the slowing sales of disc-based music games, which in 2009 were between 30 and 55 per cent on 2008, data from Microsoft suggests that DLC is selling as well over Xbox Live as it ever has.

SUCCESSFUL MUSIC GAMES HAVEN'T JUST AWAKENED THE WORLD TO THE UNIVERSAL POWER OF MUSIC, BUT TO THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF GAMES THEMSELVES

Rigopulos, at least, remains optimistic. "I absolutely do not believe that rhythm-action gaming has reached its peak," he asserts. "Of course, 2009 was a tough year with the recession, which especially affects music games given the relatively high price point of instrument bundles. But in the long term, people's passion for music isn't going away, and rhythm gaming will continue to provide people with a deeper level of engagement with the music they love. So, yes, I do think that future music games will exceed the sales success of the last generation."

It's not the human love of music alone that has driven the popularity of rhythm gaming over the past decade: music games are, just as importantly, some of the purest examples of videogames full stop. Successful examples haven't just awakened the wider world to the universal power of music, but to the very nature, appeal and transformative power of games themselves.

THE SUCCESSES THAT NEVER WERE



Not all of Konami's inventions of the late-'90s music-game boom in Japan saw the success of *DrumMania* (above). *KeyboardMania*, released in 2000, lasted only a year before being cancelled. It had two full 24-key keyboards, and only genuine pianists could hope to pass its songs on the hardest difficulty settings. *ParaParaParadise*, meanwhile, was like *DDR* for the hands, challenging players to move their arms about in time with popular songs in a vague imitation of Para Para, a gesture-based Japanese form of dancing. *ParaParaParadise* machines are now incredibly rare finds.


SONY



Fifteen developers, five years, and at last a launch title – OneBigGame is one massive undertaking for charity

July 2005, and as Pink Floyd's guitar sounds weave around London's Live 8 concert in Hyde Park, over in Amsterdam several strands of thinking are also coming together in the mind of **Martin De Ronde** (left). The studio he co-founded, Guerrilla Games, is changing hands, and a non-compete clause with purchaser SCEE has left him wondering: what's next?

Back in the mid-'90s, Guerrilla – then called Lost Boys – had an internet arm working on a project called Starchild, which aimed to put virtual worlds into wards. Essentially *Second Life* for hospitals, it was fatally ahead of its time, but the concept of doing good with game technology stuck with De Ronde. A decade later, perhaps now was the chance to make that idea a reality.

Like everyone who saw Mark Healey's *Rag Doll Kung Fu* presentation at GDC in March 2005, De Ronde was blown away by what Healey and a few friends at Lionhead had done in their spare time. They had made something good enough to showcase Valve's still-fledgling Steam platform. What might other developers be achieving?

At the same seminal GDC, De Ronde saw Eric Zimmerman's panel session, 'Tackling the Emily Dickinson Licence', where Clint Hocking, Peter Molyneux and Will Wright pitched inventive game designs based on Emily Dickinson's poems. If freed of commercial pigeonholes, De Ronde suspected we'd see more such innovation in games.

Mulling all this over, he wondered why, if the game industry really was as big as movies, music, and television, it had never made an equivalent impact in charity. There was the Child's Play campaign, the Entertainment Software Association's charity and Games Aid, which all did good work, but there was nothing on the scale of Band Aid. Watching a TV documentary on Bob Geldof's 1985 event in the lead up to 2005's Live 8 extravaganza, De Ronde had his eureka moment.

"Seeing how Band Aid came together, with the musicians teaming up and recording that single, was when the thought came to me," De Ronde says. "If we're going to do something in the games industry then it should be that – Band Aid, but for videogames."

Five years later, and the result of De Ronde's brainstorm, OneBigGame, is finally seeing its first release – Zoë Mode's *Chime*. It's a stylish, creative title, just as he'd hoped for, developed by professional developers for free, with the profits going to charity.

Five years is a long time, but De Ronde has hardly wasted a minute. Videogames aren't music singles. Geldof

THE NEED FOR SPEED

Dave Perry's contribution to OneBigGame takes a fast trip down memory lane

It doesn't even have a name yet, but ex-Shiny chief Dave Perry knows what he wants his OneBigGame contribution to feel like: a ZX Spectrum oldie called *3D Deathchase*.

Well, not exactly, obviously – a screenshot of the original (left) looks more like a system crash than fun to many modern eyes. But the creator of *Earthworm Jim* was a Sinclair fanatic as a kid, and he wants to evoke that sense of speed he remembers from childhood for today's gamers.

"It was just technically amazing for the time," Perry recalls. "How the heck did Mervyn [Estcourt] get this 3D forest moving so fast? As a game programmer, I was seriously threatened by that game."

Perry likes how *3D Deathchase's* gameplay willed him to drive more dangerously. "The risk/reward would make you get a little crazy," he says. Later games, like *Chase HQ* and *Driver* have inspired similar feelings, Perry concedes, but he believes he can do better.

"I want to tune into that mechanic to really take the idea to the next level, where you push yourself to your personal limit so you are almost wondering how the heck you are still alive," Perry explains. "The graphics need to be updated – everything needs to change – but the idea of chasing something down and the large dangerous expanse will stay."

The game will be made by an indie team called Little Chicken, although the workload from Perry's ambitious game-streaming business, Gaikai, has stalled the project, and Little Chicken has also been pre-occupied.

"Luckily neither of us has been beating up the other for attention," Perry admits, adding that will change. "This will be a labour of love. No time pressure, but it should be a fun project."



had managed egos and massaged insecurities, but Band Aid involved few technical challenges. In contrast, making even a simple game is a big project, and De Ronde also needed to wrap together whatever contributions he could rustle up.

Tackling all this took time – and the solution was a long way off at GDC 2006, when De Ronde began seeking contributions from the game industry. Happily, developers were enthusiastic. *PaRappa* creator **Masaya Matsuura**'s response was typical: "How could I hesitate to support something that pulls people together for the betterment of our world? It was pretty much done and dusted from the moment I heard about it."

The Band Aid parallel especially appealed to developers, who saw themselves as equals to artists working in other areas. "OneBigGame is about developers designing games that will be sold commercially, with proceeds going to charity, not people giving away their company's money," says **Charles Cecil**, another OneBigGame recruit. "There's a profound difference in the approach relative to other industry charities."

As well as taking names to create the first games, De Ronde formalised his early intimates into a team of volunteers to carry the project forward, and marshalled an advisory board to give it the required weight and reach. He picked up CAA's Seamus Blackley after veteran developer **Dave Perry** said the Xbox co-deviser had been mooting something similar. Blackley rolled his efforts into OneBigGame.

"Even in the very early stages, Martin's conviction for OneBigGame was very strong – he clearly had the will to make it happen," says advisory board member **Alan Yu**, the former GDC director now at iPhone game publisher ngmoco. "Having the board amplify that conviction into support across the industry was probably the most valuable thing we've done to help him."

De Ronde got realistic feedback, too. Nobody disliked the project, he says, but people did raise practical issues, and everyone had an opinion as to how OneBigGame should be structured. "I actually pitched an idea for [just that] – one big game – and my hope was to get every game company to contribute their characters to it," reveals Dave Perry, who is now updating a ZX Spectrum game for the venture. "Wishful thinking, of course, but I'd love to see it happen."

> "You can stick musicians in a room for a weekend and have a hit single, but stick a couple of game designers in a room and all you have is crazy ideas"

Perry's *Mario* vs *Tomb Raider* vs *Earthworm Jim* mash-up was probably never realistic, but OneBigGame was initially meant to be something close to that – a boxed product, featuring various developers' mini-games integrated to create a feast of interactive enjoyment.

Just writing it out it seems daunting, but when you imagine having dozens of the world's best developers offering to help, it's easier to see why the idea persisted. It was closer to the Band Aid model, too – a single-shot extravaganza to rally developers, retailers, publishers and consumers around a media-shattering launch and product.

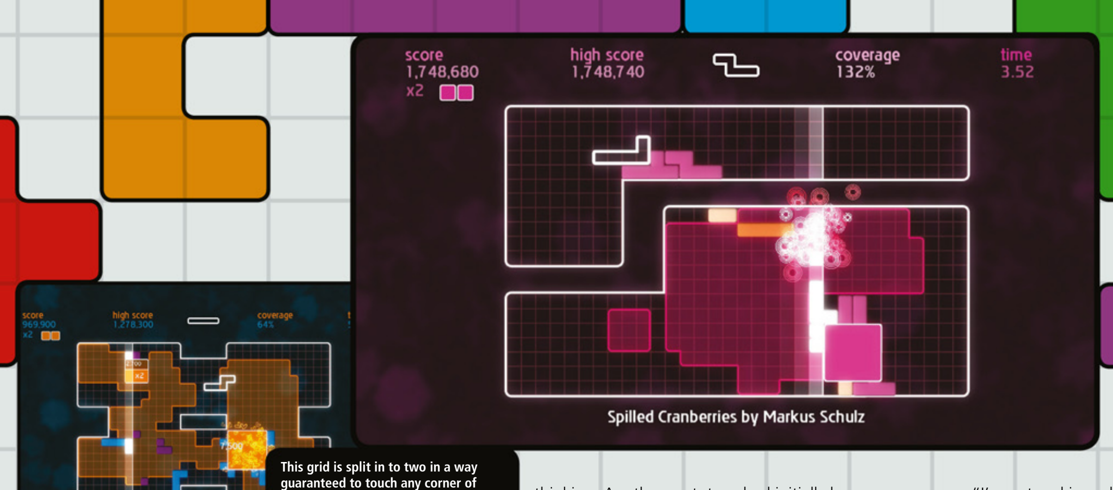
But it was also completely unfeasible, as De Ronde recalls: "Some of these famous luminaries were attached to a certain platform – are they allowed to work on a multiplatform game? Will you get their time? Also, you can stick a couple of musicians in a room for a weekend and have a hit single, but stick a couple of game designers in a room for a weekend and all you have is crazy ideas. You need to involve them in the whole development process.

"You need to find a developer that's going to build the big game. You need to invest money first before something comes out of it, so that's going to be a tricky. Are they going to do it pro bono, are they going to spend $3m? It's still an opportunity cost for them. Can you find one grand design that everybody feels happy with? Or will famous designer A feel a little bit grumpy that his mini-game is tucked away somewhere in level 12, whereas famous designer B's game is right at the start?"

De Ronde and his team persisted for a year before abandoning the single game concept in 2007. There was a bright side, however – the idea of a OneBigGame platform based on Flash had been suggested early in the project, but it had been sidelined because boxed games still seemed all-important. By 2007, though, reality inside and outside the project had caught up, as the multimillion-dollar success of games like *Bejeweled* became common knowledge.

The 12 months were hardly wasted, either. Many big developers had verbally committed to contributing – and they could still do so via the new modus operandi, only now each game would be

Variety in the shape of *Chime*'s various different gameplay grids means that particular strategies will play out in contrasting ways from level to level. Some players will prefer to place their quads in the grid corners first – and some *Chime* grids have a lot of corners, to put it mildly



This grid is split in to two in a way guaranteed to touch any corner of your brain the kinaesthetic experience hasn't already managed to penetrate

US and the Netherlands, these studios aren't paid, but De Ronde hopes any follow-up releases will be created by the same partnerships, on a royalty or fixed-fee basis.

Currently, the major draw for these indies is the chance to raise their profile working with some industry greats. Matsuura met one young team from the Netherlands called Triangle at the Tokyo Game Show in 2008, and it's now producing his iPhone title, *WINtA*, for OneBigGame.

"We started by sending them a game design document of our vision along with a basic prototype," Matsuura explains. "From there we've been working together in a scratch and build fashion, and indeed we have no set structure for how we'll proceed to the finish line."

Elsewhere, the prototype of Cecil's *Minesweeper Adventure* was done as a student project. "The game was prototyped with minimum risk, and a team of highly talented students got to work on a project that had a high probability of actually being made," Cecil notes.

De Ronde's team is now juggling 15 game projects, of which seven are taking shape or nearing completion. He is in ongoing talks with another 20 or so developers, which demonstrates the wide support for his concept.

Four OneBigGame games have been officially announced – *Chime*, *Minesweeper Adventure*, *WINtA* and Perry's unnamed Flash racing title – with others to be revealed over 2010. Zoë Mode's contribution – OneBigGame's launch title, *Chime* – has followed an interesting path that highlights the charity's flexible thinking. Another prototype had initially been developed, but Zoë Mode decided *Chime* would be a better fit for OneBigGame. The snag was that it was created in XNA for XBLA, prompting OneBigGame to diversify away from that hard-won Flash portal and advertising model.

While handling XBLA games presented yet more complications, De Ronde says the timing was good, in that advertising revenues have fallen with the recession, undermining the economics of the pure Flash model. Plus, "at the time, you couldn't sell Flash games, so we'd have had to write a C++ downloadable version to do direct sales, and conversion rates are only one or two per cent of all the people who play."

With console games came the need to deal with the platform holders. OneBigGame was already speaking to them in respect of their firstparty studios, De Ronde explains, so he went back to learn the mechanics of releasing games on their fledgling digital stores. Then there was the thorny issue of platform-holder royalty fees.

"Some waive it, some don't, and some are considering it – and there are only three platforms," De Ronde notes, adding philosophically, "It's to do with corporate rules and regulations. Who are we to argue that they should waive the royalty fee for us? It would be fantastic, of course, but if they say yes then they might end up with 15 other charities on their doorsteps.

"I'm not making a big deal out of it – it's something that we just have to live with. One platform owner has given us a verbal commitment for doing something – so we've got our fingers crossed. I'm just happy that we can actually release games on these platforms."

Chime is being sold on XBLA for just 400 points by OneBigGame partners Easy Tiger and Valcon Games, which will handle the publishing duties required for retailing on Microsoft's marketplace. Like other OneBigGame developers, Zoë Mode has granted OneBigGame an exclusivity contract for a limited period (specific deals range from four to 12 months) during which time all proceeds go to charity. The developer retains control of its intellectual property throughout, and after the exclusivity ends, it can use the game how it likes.

While there are obvious pitfalls – all parties will need to avoid confusing consumers – the developer having control of its IP is seen as crucial for attracting sufficiently high-quality games to OneBigGame. Even the smallest games can take thousands of man-hours to produce, and De Ronde argues that this is the fairest win-win solution achievable.

"OneBigGame does not own any IP because we're non-profit, so there's no need," he says. "After the distribution rights revert back to the developer they can continue that particular game, or create sequels or enhanced versions."

De Ronde is encouraging the latter approach, so consumers understand the new version no longer generates funds for charity, but there's no stipulation. The time period of exclusivity also varies in recognition that premium platforms, such as XBLA, PSN, WiiWare, DSiWare, PSP Minis and iPhone, all require more development work than pure Flash games

MAKE LOVE NOT WAR

Masaya Matsuura's *WINtA* takes OneBigGame to iPhone and beyond

"I see it as one of my personal missions in life to advance the possibilities of music games," the founder of NanaOn-Sha, Masaya Matsuura, tells us. "As long as a glimpse of possibility can be found, I'm willing to take on a challenge, regardless of its scale. OneBigGame is no exception."

Matsuura-san's contribution, *WINtA*, is a new music game for Apple's iPhone that the father of the genre hopes will spark cross-pollination with artists from other arts and media; Matsuura outlined at Nottingham's GameCity how collaboration has become a big inspiration for him.

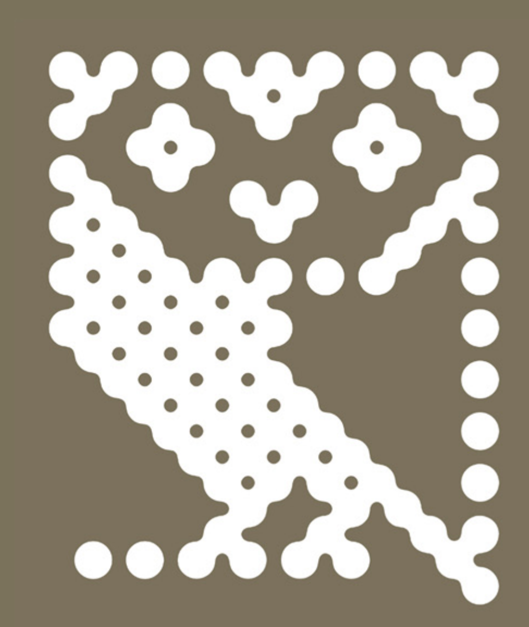
WINtA – it stands for War Is Not the Answer – has only been shown in video form to date, but the gameplay will be familiar to fans of *PaRappa The Rapper* and *UmJammer Lammy*. You'll clear levels by pressing buttons as they appear in time to the music, triggering audio samples in the now-traditional style. Clearing two consecutive button waves in Hard Mode without making a mistake will see ad-lib buttons appear, at which point you can freestyle.

WINtA will make its iPhone debut in the first half of 2010. Next, Matsuura will provide the game framework to other artists to create their own *WINtA* stages. "As micro projects, games are an ideal environment for graphic designers, artists and animators to collaborate on equal terms," Matsuura says. "Our goal is to make *WINtA* a foothold in this process."

Matsuura says *WINtA* could be released on other platforms, too. "We chose iPhone because at the time it was best suited to this style of collaboration, but I wouldn't rule out versions for Android and other platforms in the future."

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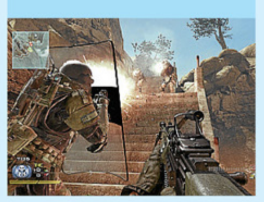
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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Modern Warfare 2



Name: The Dude. Occupation: busting many a cap in many an ass thanks to his new heartbeat sensor. And then possibly smoking a cigar while piloting an AC-130.
360, PC, PS3, ACTIVISION

Mighty Flip Champs



***Portal* and pixel-art go through the blender as WayForward brings the speedrun into the quantum age in this ingenious, and largely unsung, platformer.**
DSI, WAYFORWARD TECHNOLOGIES

You, Me & the Cubes



Reminds us of those gummy men that flop down windows and end up fuzzy. The levels build into nightmares slowly, before the screw turns and reduces us to tears.
WII, NINTENDO

All points North

The well-charted charms of Nathan Drake

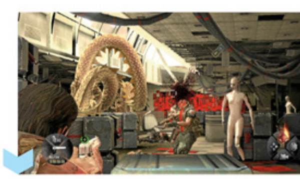


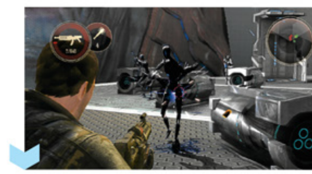
Actor Nolan North's had 129 roles over the last 13 years. He's played a TV doctor, Hades, Leonard Nimoy, various X-Men and the Prince of Persia. But has his success as Nathan Drake set both him and the industry on repeat?

And you thought you were sick of bald space marines. Soon you will be able to chalk up another paradigm to the list of things the game industry has recycled to the point of offensive ubiquity. His name is Nathan Drake – one part Indiana Jones to one part Captain Mal; simmer, stir and mass produce.

Success has brought imitators, and the roguish hero of *Uncharted* has rapidly multiplied, most recently appearing in *Dark Void* under the pseudonym of Will – a rocketeer of similar stature, complexion and humour to the adventurer we know, yet reduced in the way that photocopies are. Before that, Ubisoft attempted to deploy the vocal talents of Drake actor Nolan North in its *Prince Of Persia* reboot, but instead of wisecracks and ribaldry and lovably goofish bravado we got an emetic mixture of jock swagger and smarm. And these are the early, most successful replicants. Soon, we will have the copies of copies, and the copies of those too – and while the bald space marine was characterless enough to offer a fairly simple template for duplication, Drake requires a lightness of touch, wit and space for his complexities to unfold and appeal. This is not something that the copycats will muster.

This is not to decry Nolan North's talents. While he seems happy to knock out the occasional Drake-alike, this is in the context of another 35 roles sandwiched in between his two turns as Drake-proper. Instead, this is more an indictment of the game industry's tendency to supposedly mitigate risk by rote repetition of the trappings of success. Imitation is said to be the sincerest form of flattery, but it's also the easiest way that cufflinks in boardrooms can reduce art and entertainment to bullet points. It's a way of business that has a great legacy in videogames: some '90s shooters did little more than change the colour of the guns, and yet were happily devoured by gamers because their mechanics assured a certain level of entertainment. Is this the case now that games involve greater narrative and aesthetic complexity? Maybe not: *Army Of Two: The 40th Day* seems a rarity among the winter releases for its adherence to a template. The Drake clone army could be in for some unexpected resistance.

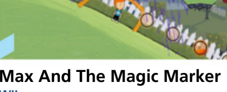










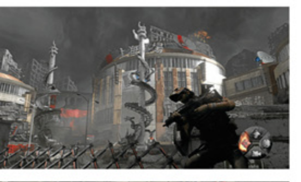


Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



ARMY OF TWO: THE 40TH DAY

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** EA
DEVELOPER: EA MONTREAL **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E204, E208





Weapon customisation returns, allowing you to fit all manner of barrels and scopes to your guns or even paint them with stripes, should you wish. Upgrades have been carefully balanced, however, and few are overpowered. There is usually a trade-off between increased firepower and reduced handling



Army Of Two: The 40th Day doesn't feel like a game forged in the heat of creative passion. It's a thirdperson shooter and a reasonably sturdy one at that, with some neat considerations towards twoplayer co-op and a decent selection of online supplements. Yet, as adequate an expression of the genre as it is, it somehow can't quite conjure those high notes of enthusiasm – akin to the way in which a whiteboard diagram of demographics and key features fails to inspire heart palpitations.

As you and a co-op buddy headshot, roadie-run and fist-bump your way through the legions of ethnically untraceable terrorists who have blown up Shanghai, the game does offer a few of its own ideas. Tricks such as the occasional moral choice, or the returning weapon upgrade system, are welcome enough even if they feel a little like supplications to a boardroom-determined quota of additional value. The uncommon setting of Shanghai itself, and oddities such as the game's surprising zoo massacre level, may have the sense of reverse engineering rather than ingenuity about them, but they do remain novelties in a genre that is otherwise averse to risk.

And besides, all this is far preferable to a game that seems to throw itself at the demographic of whooping bloodthirsty jingoists – read *The 40th Day*'s predecessor. EA Montreal has been careful to moderate the tone since that last outing. Mercenary protagonists Rios and Salem return, but have left their frat-boy high spirits back at the kegger. There's less enforced revelry at the violence – in fact, the set-up would suggest that they want little part of it, having had no intention of fighting a two-man war at the mission's inception. Nor are you now pitched against hordes of ghastly foreigners: this time it's a transnational pseudo-religious terrorist army intent on delivering a harsh Bible lesson to all of humanity via the annihilation of Shanghai.



> Alongside the hostage minigame, there are other momentary diversions, such as the ability to mock surrender, then quickly draw your pistol

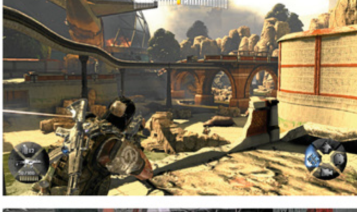
Finding themselves in the middle of the terrorists' apocalyptic plans, Rios and Salem's morality is tested too, with the act of saving hostages transmuting to positive karma and eventual rewards. This most commonly takes the form of a minigame, in which the players need to identify and grab the ranking terrorist officer, forcing the others to surrender. Straight-up firefights usually don't work out all that well for the hostages. Elsewhere, and in the game's one true burst of idiosyncrasy, you are periodically offered moral choices which, though outwardly obvious, lead to unexpected consequences, economically and wittily described in short comic-book cutscenes.

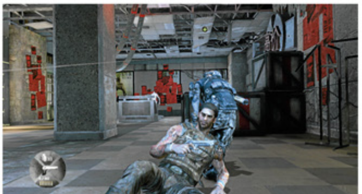
Although, alongside the hostage minigame, there are other momentary diversions – such as the ability to mock surrender, then quickly draw a pistol to gun down gullible goons – these are relatively trivial additions that rarely come to much use. Otherwise, the stop-and-pop play falls back on tawdry conventions, such as the



Army Of Two **is a little more sluggish than** ***Gears Of War*** **in the movement of its characters. While they shift in and out of cover more fluidly, their roadie-run takes a few moments to kick in, meaning that it's not terribly useful apart from in large open spaces**

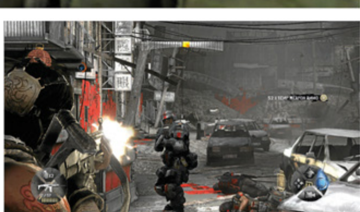


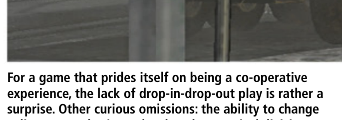


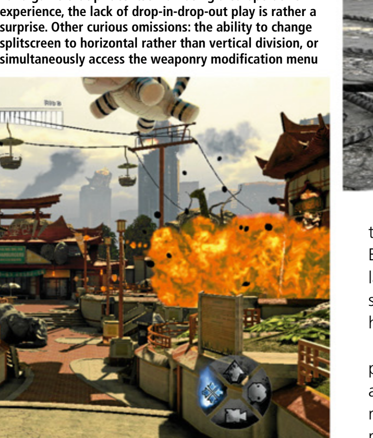




Downed players are able to shoot from their prone position while awaiting rescue, and a fallen partner can be dragged to safety (below left). Unfortunately, the AI's understanding of 'safety' seems to include places that are about to be pounded by rockets







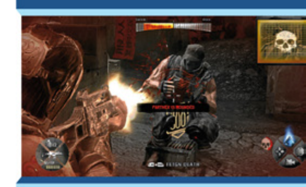
For a game that prides itself on being a co-operative experience, the lack of drop-in-drop-out play is rather a surprise. Other curious omissions: the ability to change splitscreen to horizontal rather than vertical division, or simultaneously access the weaponry modification menu

heavy who can only be shot from behind, requiring players to aggravate him alternately (see 'Anger management'). Since this comes up a lot, it's a shame your AI partner doesn't know how to deal with it, and despite the fairly decent number of orders at your disposal, it proves too frustrating an act of puppetry to execute when under fire.

All this said, *Army Of Two* is clearly designed as a co-op experience, and with a real live buddy the game's tactical options open up – not just because you can coordinate verbally and more efficiently, but because there are co-operative possibilities enshrined in the game's mechanics. One neat trick sees you take cover behind your partner when he wields a riot shield, automatically moving with him. The levels, too, are largely designed with a good eye for crossfire opportunities and flanking manoeuvres (although there are, equally, some inexplicable bottlenecks). But despite the nod to certain landmarks, the shattered city here doesn't quite manage to capture a sense of place – certainly not in the exquisite way that early glimpses of *Kane & Lynch: Dog Days* reflect the dark, bustling urbanity of Shanghai. There's the spectacle of being inside a flaming skyscraper as it gets ripped in half, while a slightly perplexing excursion to a zoo offers variety of an eccentric kind. But elsewhere the blue skies and balloons are largely replaced by offices and alleyways strewn with rubble, and rendered with the homogenised power of the Unreal engine.

Online there's plenty to take in, from the persistence of your pimped-out weaponry and the possibility of designing your own mercenary face masks, to the now ubiquitous mode in which you hole up to fight off successive waves of AI bad guys. But while generous in substance and competent in execution (a smattering of bugs and glitches notwithstanding), there's something anodyne about *The 40th Day* that's only partly masked by the hurly burly of co-op. EA Montreal set out to create a thirdperson shooter, and while it has fulfilled this ambition, the game has nothing else to say, no original drama to stage and no intention to move its genre forward any great distance. Its occasional gimmicks will massage the Metacritic average, but it never quite convinces that this is much more than *Gears Of War* repackaged as a contemporary war fantasy – and perhaps EA has the whiteboard diagrams to prove it doesn't have to. **[7]**

Anger management



The aggro system returns with some minor improvements. As before, enemies focus their fire on whichever player is causing them the most hassle, a bar at the top of the screen indicating just how much attention either Rios or Salem is receiving in return for their efforts. While this is still useful to distract enemies long enough for a successful flank, it feels a lot more organic now, as enemies won't simply ignore a player just because he isn't the focus of aggro.



DARK VOID

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: AIRTIGHT GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E191, E203, E209



The majority of enemies you face don't pose a huge threat as individuals. Will's recharging health is generous on normal difficulty settings, although the blurring and desaturation that precedes death isn't very easy to read



A few hours in and *Dark Void* finally realises that it's not terribly good at being *Gears Of Uncharted: 1939*, and gives up the whole thing as a bad job. The player may have drawn the same conclusion much earlier – the game's opening section is a photofit of features from more handsomely endowed titles, glumly composited here into awkward resemblance.

The story follows Nathan Drake, here called Will, as his plane tumbles through a portal in the Bermuda Triangle and into an ancient conflict between the stranded humans and exiled alien overlords that dwell in The Void. Far from being dark, the place initially resembles *Uncharted*'s colourful jungles, though less capably drawn, and seen through a thirdperson camera with limited peripheral vision that renders the environments claustrophobic.

Although the enemies you fight here aren't pirates but shiny, spindly things, not unlike I, Robot's mechanical menaces, elsewhere *Dark Void*'s deference to *Uncharted* is both bizarre and self-effacing – Will himself is even voiced by the same actor as Drake, and he looks and animates with cartoon similarity. Stings of panpipe music can be heard, much like those that inflect *Uncharted*'s score. There's even a boat







While the landscape of rugged rock is suitably epic, the interiors of alien craft rarely hit the mark. Although perfectly cavernous, there's something a little too clean-cut about them

> Dark Void's deference to Uncharted is both bizarre and self-effacing – Will himself is even voiced by the same actor as Drake



suspended in the jungle. Rarely do such comparisons flatter *Dark Void*, however, but only remind you how clumsily its protagonist moves, and how disjointed and abrupt its narrative feels. Call it a tingling of our sixth sense, but this feels like a game only roughly edited for quality concerns – one entire chapter, called 'The Village', involves simply walking across a bridge and listening to a line of dialogue, delivered by a man standing in a small crowd of inert villagers – although not, it would seem, actually in *a village*.

Later, by completely incoherent means, Will bumps into Nikola Tesla, who fits him with a limited-boost rocket pack. Combat moves from the horizontal to the vertical, with Will able to hang beneath ledges, just as he was previously able to take cover behind pillars and leap between them. But it's a prescriptive interpretation of something that in a game such as *Assassin's Creed II* is so thrillingly freeform. Will can rarely choose his own route through these early environments, and ledges can only be leapt to and grabbed when a context-sensitive







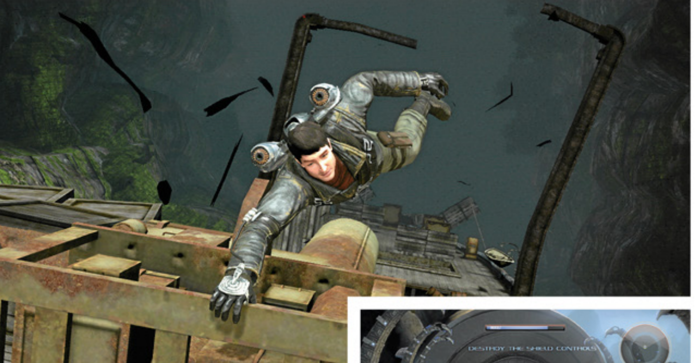
Button prompts appear above nearby ships, enabling you to commandeer allied craft and hijack enemies using a QTE, which sees Will scurry around the edge of the saucer, avoiding laser fire, while trying to prise off a panel



marker pops up – which it often doesn't on ledges that otherwise seem viable. Sometimes the game lets you totter off cliffs, and other times places invisible barriers in the way. For a game with a jetpack, your freedom of movement is miserly – and the jetpack seems, at first, to be the only hook. The shooting achieves a baseline competence, but early weaponry is so desperately underpowered that you might as well be pelting your robotic foes with handfuls of millet. The enemies rarely monopolise on the weakness of your arsenal, and tend to pop in and out of cover until dead, rather than flanking or harassing you. They are, besides, unsatisfying to fight – entirely without horror or threat.

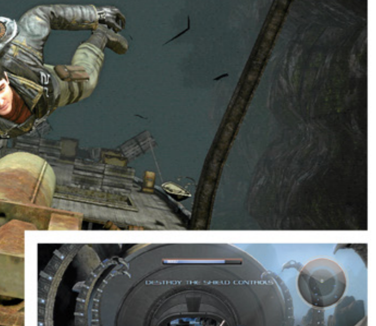
And then comes the event referenced up there at the beginning. Your jetpack gets replaced with one that enables continual flight, and *Dark Void* almost completely discards its clunky vertical cover mechanics to transform into *Crimson Skies* by way of The Rocketeer. It's a stark and welcome change – one that presages a protracted sequence that threatens to inspire awe with dynamism and spectacle. It's hard, in fact, to understand where it's come from.

Suddenly a huge canyon is your playground, and objectives are handed out with pace and variety, vacillating fluidly between air and ground. After seeing off some flying saucers, you land on a floating, cylindrical alien contraption, fight your way through to its core, destroy it from the inside, then fly out before it explodes. Then there's the matter of an allied ship, harried by some monstrous robo-lizard, the disappointing QTE death throes of which you barely consider before plummeting *Descent*-style through a vast tunnel system.



But it's really the moments when *Dark Void* allows you to choose the scale of your engagement that it thrills most – whether you're pummelling enemies' metal heads from on high or simply using your powers of flight to outflank them, performing lightning raids before swooping out of range. Will's body flutters like a pendant as you scream along, articulating with credible weight as the winds batter him at each turn; clearly his flight animation represents a good deal of labour and love. Less thought has gone into the controls, which affix directional special moves on to a click of the right analogue stick. Nonetheless, the possibility of a quick 180, and a button that locks the camera on to your nearest target, help mitigate the annoyance of zipping past your target – and enemy ships behave with just enough evasive smarts to present some challenge without becoming frustratingly slippery.

The more varied sections of rocketeering give you a glimpse of what might have been if *Dark Void*'s pleasures hadn't been fragmented by retrograde corridor battles and garbled narrative. Nor is it without rough edges – from its half-considered upgrades system (see 'Tool kitty') to botched cutscene triggers. Yet, somehow, it remains hard to actively dislike, perhaps because the game, for all its flaws, isn't a frustrating one. Sequences that fail to excite are quickly gone, and those that delight tend to be the free, open experiences that occupy the most time. Somehow, *Dark Void* just about rises above its faults, although it's hardly at risk of flying too close to the sun. **[6]**



Dark Void is a short game, the first third of which is limp, and despite the promise that collectibles will now be highlighted on your radar, there's little reason to go back through it. It's a shame that multiplayer isn't on offer because the game's mixture of ground and air combat would be a huge draw with smarter combatants



Enemies that use their own jetpacks to manoeuvre themselves about do add some interest, not so much because they outflank you but because their presence is an invitation to fight them in the air, creating battles in which the combatants criss-cross back and forth like aerial jousters

Tool kitty



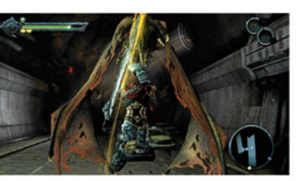
Blasting enemies and finding collectibles adds to a currency with which you can upgrade weaponry. But the way this has been priced creates a disincentive to use or upgrade more than one weapon. In fact, our bank balance was such that we were only able to fully upgrade one weapon by the end of the game – and while we weren't assiduously collecting every credit, we were hardly spurning them. The weapons you encounter, of which there are six in total, are next to useless without upgrades, and only one is plentifully replenished from the enemies' dropped ammunition.

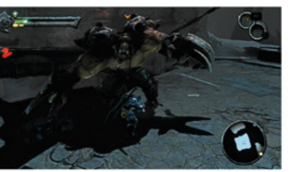


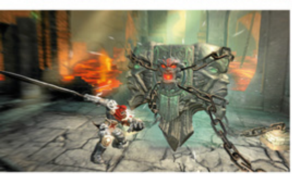


DARKSIDERS

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** THQ
DEVELOPER: VIGIL GAMES **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E189







In another nod to *God Of War*, human souls are the currency of choice on post-armageddon Earth, just as they were in ancient Greece. Like Kratos, War collects souls from chests, enemies and destructible objects, then spends them on new weapons, combos and items

If there's one thing that sets *Darksiders* apart from its most obvious inspiration, *God Of War*, it's not the complex weaponry mechanic, or the hub world structure, or even the fact that you (eventually) get to ride a magical horse. It's that for roughly the first two hours of the game your character, fallen horseman of the apocalypse War, fights legions of demons and assorted ne'er-do-wells with a single, one-button combo. Square, square, square. Square.

Well, almost. You can also finish weakened enemies with circle, and throw rusted cars (post-civilisation earth is handily packed with them) by pressing R2. But for that long opening stretch the mainstay of the fighting in this combat-heavy thirdperson adventure consists of pressing the same button over and over. It's a disaster of pacing, and demands serious patience from players – patience which, happily, is rewarded by a meatily enjoyable fighting system when things finally come together.

That wait isn't helped by a teasing opening sequence in which War's full powers are temporarily at his disposal. It's the apocalypse, and it's happening prematurely – the horseman's lines well and truly fluffed. Big moment ruined, War wades in trying to find who's responsible, a blocky Manhattan-style city crumbling as angels (surprisingly mean ones) and demons do battle all around. Hell wins, and War is killed. Skip a century, and a shadowy council accuses War of jump-starting armageddon, sending him back to the ruined, demon-littered Earth to prove his innocence, which he does with the assistance of ambiguous fallen angel Samael.

The grandeur of this setup is then formalised into a rather less grand hub-world structure and parallel rollout of War's lost abilities. In return for guiding War to big baddie The Destroyer, Samael demands the hearts of four powerful boss creatures, who each reside at the ends of lever-and-platform mazes in predictably themed lairs (a castle, underground catacombs, a desert). Abilities enabling War to reach these areas are granted in sequence – gliding wings to traverse large gaps, for instance, or the power to momentarily slow time and so avoid the deadly attacks of giant sand worms. Weapons are also rationed out as needed, with the arrival of a giant throwing star followed quickly by the appearance of the Jailer, a minor boss whose green pus-filled weakspots are vulnerable to projectiles, and later the presentation of a giant, crystal-smashing gauntlet moments before War discovers his path is blocked by smashable crystals. Handy.



Once mapped to a D-pad shortcut, weapons can be swapped in realtime, so it's possible to deploy everything in one frenzied burst

This means that, following those arid first two hours, when War's upgrades do arrive there's a plodding, predictable quality to them. The game gives players only the tools required for the job at hand, and as such War rarely feels as enjoyably destructive and powerful as he should. Even so, the variety which is initially so lacking does gradually creep in to the combat, along with a small element of customisation. The throwing star can be charged for greater damage by holding R2, and launched at up to five enemies simultaneously, ricocheting from one to the next. Later it can be swapped for a gun which, like Dante's in *Devil May Cry*, contains unlimited ammunition. Similarly, the gauntlet is interchangeable with the scythe – both weapons are activated by triangle, and their attacks slot in alongside those of War's regular sword (square, square, square, triangle) in different ways. These options

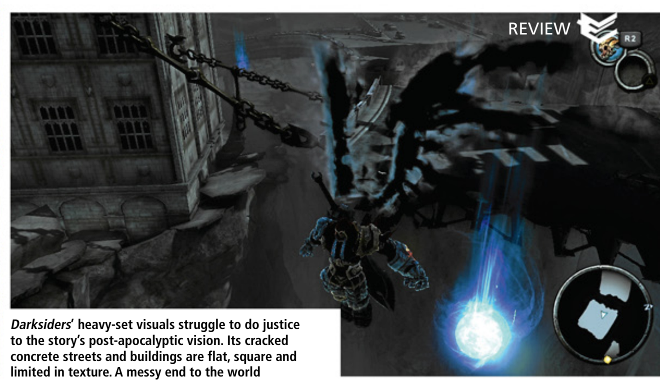


War travels through *Darksiders*' hub world using a series of supernatural tunnels called serpents' holes, which are accessed through conversation with the merchant Vulgrim at his many pop-up locations. Later, War is reunited with his summonable horse, Ruin, who makes passage through the game's many cavernous spaces swifter









Darksiders' heavy-set visuals struggle to do justice to the story's post-apocalyptic vision. Its cracked concrete streets and buildings are flat, square and limited in texture. A messy end to the world



Magical abilities can be purchased from a demon vendor called Vulgrim and mapped to the shortcut dial pictured above. Powers include swords sprouting up from the ground, area-of-effect spells, and health-restoring buffs

result in an imposing, RPG-style inventory screen, but the mechanical truth is much simpler – once mapped to a D-pad shortcut, the weapons can be swapped in realtime, so it's possible to deploy everything in one frenzied burst.

This is fun, and it's a big shame that the game's area-and-power progression system means you'll be well over halfway through before War is fully tooled up. Another shame is that War is only reunited with his horse, Ruin, at an advanced stage – navigating the game's big halls and puzzle spaces with the horseman's lumbering stroll is maddening by this point, and the first bout of mounted combat is one of those rare occasions when he *does* feel suitably powerful and destructive. Another is when he picks up an enormous bolt-launching gun dropped by a demon enemy. The gun fires bursts of three explosive serrated spears which can be detonated on command, making short work of the thick waves of enemies which follow. It's a frantic, enjoyable change of pace, and it's a shame the game doesn't deviate from its central hacking and slashing more often.

The puzzling which fills the gaps in between regular fighting and boss battles doesn't boast enough innovation or ingenious design to make it a highlight (or, at its most laboriously obvious, prevent it from being an outright chore). The boss battles themselves, meanwhile, are another borrow from *God Of War*, with the same rompy gravitas of a violent hero pitted against deities and immortals. There's a blasphemous thrill to taking on Tiamat and the Lucifer-esque Destroyer, just as there was a thrill to cutting down Ares with a giant Kratos. But it's a thrill rarely brought about by the battles themselves, which are invariably tasks of grinding repetition. Attack patterns are easily learned, and aside from the length of time it takes to bring down these bosses (bat-dragon Tiamat clocked in at nearly half an hour during our playthrough), there's nothing remarkable here.

Which is sadly true of the game as a whole. Smarter, fasting pacing could have made all the difference. When it isn't intentionally hobbled, the combat is spectacular and unique, but for too long *Darksiders* is happy to be a heavier, slower response to Sony's Greek epic, whose return in March will surely barge Vigil Games' stop-gap into the shadows. **[6]**

Boss battles feature some of the game's most gruesomely innovative design, full of maws and glowing pustules and filth. But actually playing them is a lacklustre combination of basic attack patterns and mammoth health reserves

Cast my shadow



War is trailed throughout the game by antagonistic sidekick The Watcher. A wispy shadow of a demon, The Watcher is designed to keep a check on the condemned horseman, and is voiced by Mark Hamill (and consequently sounds like a slightly-more-evil version of Batman's Joker). He's something of a wasted opportunity – he can be summoned at any point, but rather than offering the kind of in-depth characterisation seen in *Prince Of Persia*, or even hints for puzzles, he's limited to a single, generic line of dialogue relating to entire levels, and consequently feels like something of a hollow trinket.







Keeping one eye on your health during the bigger melees is the trick, unless you want death arriving with all the poignancy of a ringing phone in a cinema



TORCHLIGHT

FORMAT: MAC, PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (PC), TBA (MAC)
PUBLISHER: PERFECT WORLD ENTERTAINMENT/ENCORE, INC
DEVELOPER: RUNIC GAMES

With Blizzard playing demonic mother hen and continuing to sit on *Diablo III*, *Torchlight*'s perfectly timed as a cheerful underdog. It's an image that gets more resilient as you play – the art's brighter and more youthful, the world and plot more lightweight, and the game itself bears less cynicism, more polish and more ideas than is healthy to expect from *Diablo* homages.

Eager to please, the first minute of *Torchlight* introduces you to the game's single town, the second minute has you taking your first steps into the solitary dungeon, and the next 18 hours see you dutifully zapping between the two on a heroic quest to reach the end credits. No, wait, it was something to do with finding a lost wizard. Or curing yourself of something. *Dragon Age* this is not, but it is hugely compelling from the very first left-click that has your character bashing his or her first monster to the ground. You're treated to rapid, smooth animations, a neat crunching sound and a dramatically tumbling ragdoll corpse which all come together to provide a tiny pocket of satisfaction. Spurred on by this attention to detail, you click on a few more monsters, click on the loot they drop, click to return to town, click on a few shops, then decide to click on a few more monsters again. Repeat until 3am. To say that *Torchlight* is beautifully streamlined probably isn't as efficient as pointing out that among online gaming communities it's earned the nickname *Cracklight*, and robust mechanics twinned with four difficulty modes mean it's just as happy catering for the ultra-casual as it is for the hardcore.

Torchlight lets you advance through not one but two kinds of level. Generic XP racks up alongside Fame, which nets you a juicy skillpoint with each new rank

Where the combat distinguishes itself from *Diablo II* or, more recently, *Titan Quest* is in the far greater range of abilities your character develops. An MMOG-style bar of numbered skills and spells quickly fills up, making for melees which are less about more traditional tactical retreats and evasive weaving than they are about popping off various powers as efficiently as possible.

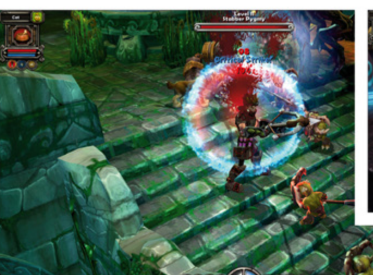
But, ultimately, it's the same lightweight design which makes *Torchlight* so accessible that bars it from greatness. The lack of a grandiose story might be a relief initially, but its absence is felt when, some eight hours in, that blinding sheen begins to wear off. Unlike other mono-dungeon experiences (*Etrian Odyssey*, to pick a recent example), the question isn't whether you have what it takes to push deeper, it's whether the game can trick you into another recursive loop of addicted clicks.

And most of the time, it can. The pint-sized team at Runic Games has created something bright and punchy, if a touch aimless, which makes up for a lack of personality (and multiplayer) with a beaming smile and lots of encouraging pats on the back. Lucky for Runic, then, that until *Diablo III* finally lumbers on to the scene, that's more than enough. **[7]**

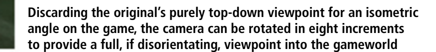
The cat returns



The sweetest of *Torchlight*'s small innovations, your character is accompanied by either a pet dog or feral-looking cat who not only nips at your foes, but can be powered up through ring, necklace and spell slots, fed fish which transform it into monsters, or even dispatched back to the surface to sell loot in town before coming bounding back with the proceeds. It might not succeed as an experiment in staving off loneliness deep down in the 14th level of a dungeon, but it does demonstrate the quick route to making a player enjoy the company of an NPC – making that NPC endlessly useful, utterly servile and mute. You might not find yourself charmed, but you'd be hard pressed not to share a few of your potions with the creature.



The action's engaging as a result of your speedy progress, yet the hacking and slashing is reduced to sound effects and existential depression if it's too easy. *Torchlight*'s stumbles are rare


Discarding the original's purely top-down viewpoint for an isometric angle on the game, the camera can be rotated in eight increments to provide a full, if disorientating, viewpoint into the gameworld



ALIEN BREED EVOLUTION: EPISODE ONE

FORMAT: 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TEAM 17 **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E205

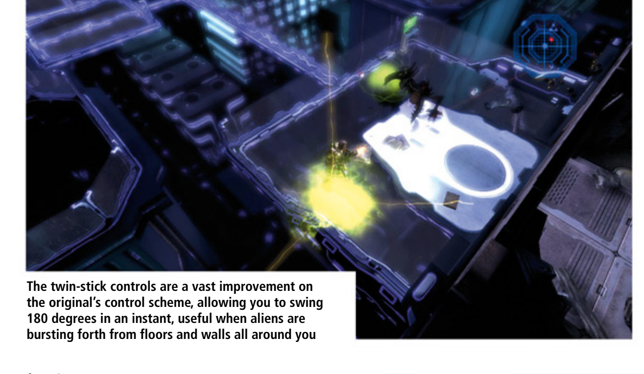
Worms' frequent updates may have incrementally modernised the game's visuals but the series' core systems remain largely untouched from their original form. This play-it-safe approach has served Team 17 well as, while its remakes rarely dazzle or surprise because of it, they remain serviceable and popular. So it is with *Alien Breed Evolution*, the developer's Aliens-inspired top-down shooter which, for this XBLA remake, sees its downed spaceship environments popped into somewhat glum 3D, while the mechanics underneath sit largely unaffected.

The result is a twin-stick shooter that sits comfortably alongside XBLA heavyweights such as *Shadow Complex* in terms of its visual fidelity, Epic's Unreal Engine put to good use rendering the fiery explosions, creaking girders and giant throbbing generators that characterise the crumbling interior of the ship, while retaining the core simplicity of its 1991 incarnation. The problem, then, is that those original systems, derivative even when the game was first released, are simply too sparse to be inspiring today.

With movement mapped to the left stick and aiming on the right, there's a pleasing precision to the controls, focused yet further by a pixel-thick laser sight that bisects the darkness, allowing you to line up shots on the approaching facehuggers with speed and exactness. But the plodding character movement, over-close camera placement (which ensures you'll frequently rely on your map to pick out offscreen enemy positions for shots) coupled with a clutch of weapons that lack weight and kickback ensures that combat lacks finesse.

More generally, the game relies almost exclusively on fetch tasks to shepherd you around the environments, the relentless enabling and disabling of doors and panels fast becoming repetitive. Since your next immediate objective is always highlighted by a blinking waypoint on the HUD map, play usually takes the form of making a bee-line for the next marker, holding down the interact button until a gauge fills before heading off to the next. Exploration off the beaten track is minimal and rewarded only by the occasional low-value secret.

The introduction of save stations, at which progress must be recorded regularly, eases the difficulty curve of the original, although achievements for completing stages without, for example, the use of health items adds artificial objectives for those who want to stiffen the challenge. But the enduring problem is that the experience's texture is without variety, the lack of set-pieces meaning that there are no distractions from the monotonous rhythm of play. Repetitive and simplistic, *Alien Breed Evolution* may remain true to its inspiration, but this first episode does no more than reinforce Team 17's reputation for serviceable but uninspiring updates of past glories. **[5]**


The twin-stick controls are a vast improvement on the original's control scheme, allowing you to swing 180 degrees in an instant, useful when aliens are bursting forth from floors and walls all around you


While the few weapons on offer do behave in different ways, they are too similar to really demand a shift in tactics. Usually, you'll simply use your favourite until the ammo runs dry, at which point you move on to the next in sequence

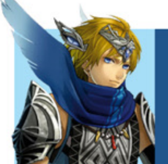
Death is the easy way out



While the original was best played with a friend in tow, in *Alien Breed Evolution* the co-op mode is poorly balanced, with scarcely enough loot to split between the players. More problematic is the fact that, if one player dies, they'll respawn a few seconds later (providing their teammate survives) with the default weapon loadout and a new set of full ammo. This removes the requirement for teams to carefully manage their resources, while neutering the sense of danger and need for trepidation when moving through the ship's dark corridors.



The game offers you three modes to choose from: Hero, Evil Lord and Princess. In Hero mode, you're given 30 seconds to save the world. There are various ways you can achieve this feat, but rest assured that most will involve regular visits to the Time Princess to reset your timer



HALF-MINUTE HERO

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), Q1 2010 (UK)
PUBLISHER: XSEED **DEVELOPER:** MARVELOUS

In games, this is how worlds begin: they start with the core of a good idea, surrounded by dozens of bad ones. Over time, casual mistakes become features, wonky concepts are beaten into workable systems, and somehow the force of nostalgia binds everything else together. We call this progress.

That title? It's all a smart lie, of course. Not only is *Half-Minute Hero*'s central premise of 30-second old-school adventures undermined almost immediately by the realisation that you can repeatedly top up your time limit for a small fee whenever a mission becomes sufficiently complex to require it, there's a deeper, more interesting revelation in store too. By reducing the ancient concept of the levelling grind – the best bad idea that RPGs ever had – to something that slides past in the blink of an eye, it turns out to be merely one part of a wider network of cause and effect, toil and reward. Structures lurk within structures, wheels within wheels, while the organisation of play spins ever outwards like the fidgety loops and coils of a Mandelbrot.

As the name suggests, then, *Half-Minute Hero* is a small game powered by some big thoughts, and while the whole thing is rather self-conscious, with – what else? – a venerable 16bit-style pixel shell and a nasty slather of internet memes on top, the inherent tartness of the concept means that, taken as a whole, it's hard to forget.

The biggest idea is this: save the world in seconds. Uncover a plot to destroy the kingdom, level up by exploring the countryside and battling monsters, pick up better loot and talk to NPCs in towns (granted, the game has no excuse but to pause the countdown at these points, but you can almost hear the cogs grinding against each other at the blunt inelegance of it all). Finally, maybe complete a nested tangle of subquests before, powered up, taking the fight to the boss's castle and defeating the monster within. Sometimes there simply isn't enough time to do all that the mission requires, so you'll have to pace yourself, completing quest parts in chunks before paying to reset the clock – another inelegance, inevitably, but one that serves to add a smart tactical element to proceedings.

It's certainly fun, but at times it's more than that: around the parody of levelling orbits a whole universe of bigger and better systems to lose yourself within. There's a map to explore, items to improve upon, rankings to achieve and new chunks of story to unlock. The grind isn't gone: it's everywhere, and the marriage of work and play remains powerfully effective.

There are side-offerings, too: a 30-second shooter, a 30-second RTS, a maze rush and variations that slice the time limit even closer to the bone. Yet, polished as they are, they're padding in a game that has already had its say on padding, and none of them blend the mechanics of sarcasm and deconstruction half as well as the main event.

And in games, of course, this is how worlds end: you save the planet, unite the kingdoms, punish the wicked and inspire the good. And, once the console's off and the game's case has been filed away, the only pleasure left is the warm realisation that it's almost as if you were never there at all. **[8]**

Extra credit

Half-Minute Hero lives every instant of its own joke, to the extent that it's willing to fling a full developer credits scroll at you after the end of each mission, ensuring that, by and large, you'll get an insight into the size of Marvelous' QA department every 90 seconds or so. Happily, these regular interruptions can be sped up if you're impatient to get on with the next, wholly familiar chunk of adventure. The pre-mission blurbs can't be similarly skipped, however, which means that they seem to crawl past.





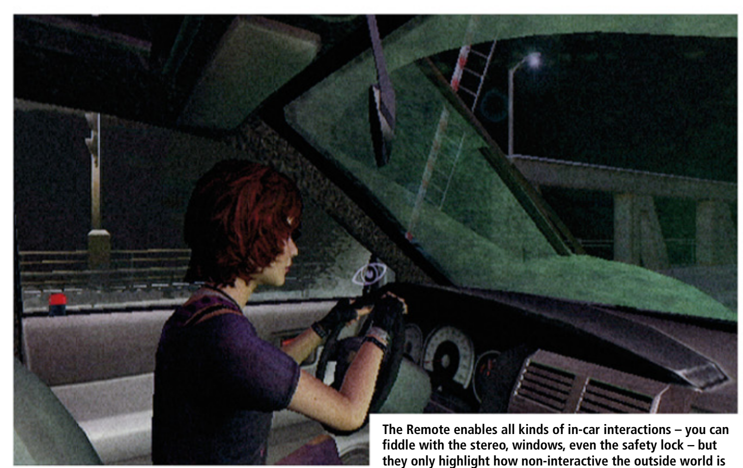
Random encounters tend to be over in a blink, generally followed by the jaunty announcement that you've just hit another level. In such spontaneous circumstances, combat is reduced to pushing right on the analogue nub



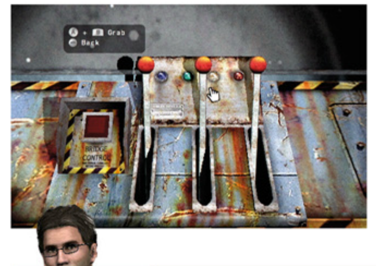
Understand from the off that the game's ill-conceived title is a misnomer of epic proportions. Unusual side-modes and random challenges throughout ensure that *Half-Minute Hero* is more than capable of taking up many hours of your time







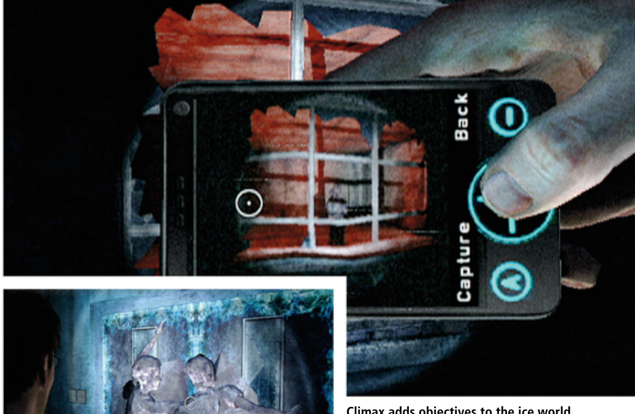
The Remote enables all kinds of in-car interactions – you can fiddle with the stereo, windows, even the safety lock – but they only highlight how non-interactive the outside world is







Lead pipe is out, flares are in: Mason's pursuers fear the light. They can clear your path or be dropped at your feet, giving you time to get out your GPS and check your route





Climax adds objectives to the ice world segments as the game progresses. Turning paparazzo for some prom queen stalking feels like padding, but the sight of meaty horrors prowling around Silent Hill's frozen citizens is one of *Memories*' creepier moments

SILENT HILL: SHATTERED MEMORIES

FORMAT: WII (VERSION TESTED), PSP, PS2
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), FEBRUARY 12 (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI **DEVELOPER:** CLIMAX

After the solid PSP *Origins*, Climax returns to *Silent Hill*'s literal origins to both reinvent the tale of Harry Mason and his missing daughter and challenge the ideas that have seen the series become stale in recent years. Don't expect to see snarling Miis getting their bobble heads stoved in, but *Shattered Memories* is very much driven by Nintendo's 'anyone can do it' approach. Cryptic clues and clumsy combat with meaty Clive Barker horrors are out in favour of more instinctual survival.

Climax has talked about combat being too much of an equaliser: facing what you fear deflates the tension. Here, you flee threats. As Silent Hill freezes over – a beautiful, snarling realtime effect – beasties come out to play and Mason begins to sprint. But this is an idealistic vision of horror action. The chase, so terrifying in the hands of a decent horror film director, is a non-event first-hand. Watching a man's back huff and puff down corridors does not create an adrenaline rush, and it's hard to shake the sense that all of the (literally) meaty action is behind you. And, on the topic of shaking, a silly Remote-jabbing monster-fling manoeuvre ensures that the pursuit descends into farce should the fiends catch up.

By fencing off monsters in a self-contained ice realm, Climax neuters thrills outside of the chase. If there's no ice, Mason is safe. A post-sprint comedown is emphasised by a rather straight take on the town itself – locales feel empty, not abandoned, while the number of characters rammed into the slim six hours makes this one of the more populated ghost towns in recent memory. The game ekes some elegant real-world puzzle design from this functional Hill – Mason can make calls to access info and use posters and signs to annotate his GPS à la *Phantom Hourglass* Link – but it is at the expense of the creepiness.

Over all of this hangs the ominous claim that 'the game plays you as much as you play it'. Psychiatry tests frame the story, allegedly profiling you and adapting the experience to your fears. But this is less Freud than fraud. Ink blot tests, colouring exercises, moral quandaries – the interludes add to an assured adult tone, thanks largely to the excellent dialogue and voice acting, but they influence little beyond reskinning props. During one runthrough Mason meets a busty cop, and the next time she's a kindly old lady, but both characters give him his phone and reveal the same pertinent information. And, as novel as repeat plays should be, the deliberately obscured nature of the testing makes it hard to bully new outcomes.

Smart Remote-pointer-based controls and Mason's nimble pace around the snowy locales ensure *Shattered Memories* is not a disagreeable six hours, but it is very rarely scary or spooky. Much of this boils down to the oxymoronic idea of the accessible survival horror. Panic is born from the unnatural and limiting; remove these obstacles and Mason's journey becomes a casual plod through a relatively smart tale. Yes, Climax is right to question creaky survival-horror mechanics untouched since the late '90s, but since when has running away solved anything? **[6]**



The dramatic beats are greatly helped by exemplary character animation. Residents are addressed in firstperson, with a zoom function for admiring dimples

Analyse this



Psychological testing comes to a head during the end credits as your state of mind is discussed in great detail. Though clearly influenced by certain previous answers – regurgitating your initial personality test – we'll admit it does make some surprisingly accurate character assessments. How did the game know of our secret love of junk food (and the lies we tell to cover it up), for example? Mason enters a KFC eatery at one point; did we spend longer in there than in any other location? The idea of analysing a player is fundamentally limited – we do not approach games as we'd approach real life – but Climax clearly has some very dark magic working away underneath it all.



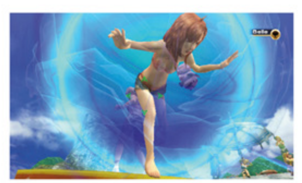
FFCC: THE CRYSTAL BEARERS

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (US), FEBRUARY 5 (UK)
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E208

Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles is Square Enix's very own mad woman in the attic, a *Final Fantasy* game in name alone, pursuing freewheeling ideas the main games would never dare. Under the watchful eye of jovial producer Akitoshi Kawazu (he autographs *Bearers*' credits with a playful farewell), this was the series that gave us a GBA-controlled GameCube game and a co-op experience shared between Wii and DS. Now, in its first purely singleplayer outing, it lets us milk cows with telekinesis.

One of the eponymous crystal bearers, protagonist Layle conjures great power with the flick of a wrist. Eschewing turn-based combat for realtime action, it takes but a Remote aim and button press to scoop up objects. No cleverer than a Force push, what could have easily descended into mindless coshing is lent a quirkier edge by a system of experimental cause and effect. Pluck a bone from a skeletal attacker and nearby wolves will cease gnashing to sit at your feet. Beetles can be screwed together into bowling balls, jellyfish electricity plugged in to other marine life, levers can be tugged on steampunk mechs to turn them against allies – it's a witty and mischievous combat system.

Following the plot – a stodgy mix of racial unease and magical mumbo-jumbo that sits at odds with the carefree vibe of the action – funnels Layle through action sequences almost entirely free of combat. A dazzling and atypical aerial gunfight in the opening minute sets the tone, letting us play the action *Final Fantasy*



The minigame structure allows for comedy asides *Final Fantasy* would usually struggle to support. Who cares if Aeris dies or not? We want to know which bikini-clad girl will fall into the sea first

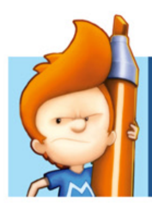
would traditionally relegate to a cutscene. Unlike those, these are rambunctious fun: a rhythm game sneaks Layle into a ball, while a train is stalked in a stealth QTE.

Minigames are not the highlights of the campaign, but the campaign in its entirety. This is particularly evident in the final three hours, when wormholes and trams zip Layle between objectives, ensuring the closest you get to a cactuar is in the comfort of first class. A system of collectible medals attempts to coax you into entering the fray, but why present the beating heart of the game as an afterthought? It clearly wasn't.

Stray from the beaten track and *Crystal Bearers* is a different game. That you can replay the story's action beats for high scores further reveals their frivolous unsuitability as the meat of the adventure. Only in these carefree, sun-dappled plains, with jolly country-and-western music strumming away in the background, do we see the game Kawazu takes responsibility for in his sign-off. That it is so oddly buried is inexplicable, but you can't deny the fun of excavation. **[7]**



Smaller grunts can be flung against walls, but these behemoths need their defences peeled away before a killer blow to their soft insides



MAX AND THE MAGIC MARKER

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** TBA
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** PRESS PLAY





The game can be frozen at any point to allow careful drawing. In a lovely artistic touch, doing so reverts the world back to Max's original doodle. It's a shame ink use rarely goes beyond obvious physics puzzles

Max And The Magic Marker is applied *Crayon Physics*: your doodles fall, roll, pivot and collide, but do so in the name of Max, a platforming hero. Bridges are drawn, stairs wonkily penned and weights applied to seesaws. A navigation aid, ink is also protective. Scribbled boulders crush foes and boxes shield from the rain. As Max climbs a volcano, it is both stairway and shelter, but only if the ink supply holds out – a brilliant moment that sees you edging forward while selectively demolishing the stairwell beneath you.

But as in Wii's *Drawn To Life*, Press Play offers a fun, practical ability that sometimes lacks a suitable playground to practise in. Scaling a volcano or ensnaring balloons to construct a larger hot-air balloon can get lost under all the planks, ladders and seesaws. Tight ink limitations force creative solutions, but once learnt, certain tricks undermine the action. The realisation, for example, that new lines attach to old drawings enables far sloppier solutions to previously elegant physics problems.

Luckily, amassing Max's catalogue of hidden trinkets sees drawing find its feet. Levels are dotted with background puzzles – dunking a basketball or a game of whack-a-mole – that spill out orbs, opening freeform modes not unlike the World Of Goo Corporation (a level entitled 'Green Coo Corp' shows further affection). And if these tasks eke out the subtleties, time trials exist to test ruthless practicality: fastest routes, minimal ink. Here, Max finds some scope missing in his obvious WiiWare forebears, *LostWinds* and *Icarian Spirits*. Here, Max earns his place in your memory blocks. **[7]**





TATSUNOKO VS CAPCOM

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM **DEVELOPER:** EIGHTING



Tatsunoko Vs Capcom is the latest in Capcom's '*Vs*' series of fighting games, and merrily sloughs off certain accumulated traditions while holding fast to others. A two-on-two fighter, the major change is in control: there are light, medium and heavy attacks with no distinction between punches and kicks, as well as the partner button for swapping between your fighters.

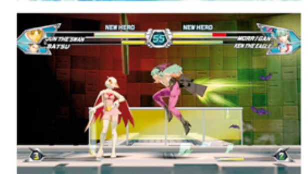
Tatsunoko's slower-paced than *Marvel Vs Capcom 2*, which at least lets you get the occasional block in, and the tag-team interplay cherry-picks from previous *Vs* games, with mid-combo air changes, mid-super changes and even changes to set up a counterattack in the middle of a multi-hit beating. It seems chaotic, but settles quickly next to the maelstrom of specials that constitutes *Tatsunoko*'s beating heart.

Inputs are simple, and button mashing is always fruitful. It's not necessarily a problem, but you can trigger mega chains by starting with a light attack and then going mad on the pad. In twoplayer it's another story, of course, but once you've learned the basics there's more: Baroque attacks and Mega Charges. The former are offensive boosts that are more powerful the higher your red bar (damage taken), and the latter let you break out of combos at any point: both are easy to use, and together create a level of strategy beyond the flashes.

The roster's a good one, reworking the Capcom favourites alongside the unfamiliar but reassuringly tonto mix from Tatsunoko, and as with all these games you can't knock the sight of Viewtiful Joe battering Ryu with a red-hot combo. You may wonder why the dev team plumped for slightly clunky 3D models rather than giving us some beautiful spritework, though.

Tatsunoko is certainly its own beast, but compared to a genre highlight like *Street Fighter IV* it can't help but feel slightly throwaway. **[7]**





Arcade mode is an utter cakewalk on anything but the higher difficulties, and if you thought *SFIV*'s endings were bad just wait until you get a load of these. Ryu's ending implies his fist is stronger than the majority of military ordnance



The Classic Controller or a GameCube pad is essential. Playing with the Wii Remote essentially puts the game on autopilot: lots of pretty things happen, but it's not much to do with the player



STARSHIP PATROL

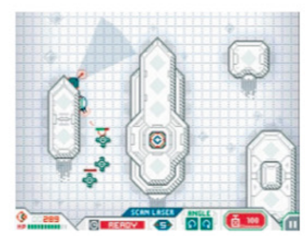
FORMAT: DSI **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** Q-GAMES

Starship Patrol is the third in a quickfire output of DSiWare games from Q-Games, and in some respects the best yet. It's a tower defence game set on cosmic graph paper, with a small number of finely carved elements that combine into a generously proportioned, and tough, whole.

There are eight weapons in your locker, only three of which are accessible at the beginning of any given battle. Each of *Starship Patrol*'s levels is a ten-wave challenge: completing each charge rewards you with a crystal, which are used in multiples to unlock the advanced kit. On the first wave, a lone missile station will take out four bat-aliens, and on the ninth a cavalcade of rotating wheels and ululating hourglasses will descend upon you before being caught in a mess of black holes, arcing lightning, tractor beams and fighter pilots.

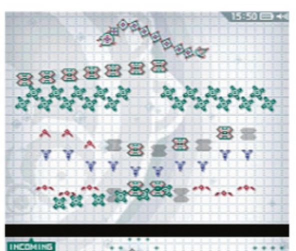
Starship Patrol gets intense. After the opening levels the difficulty increases rapidly, though it's definitely a curve rather than a wall, and ship layouts play a greater role. When your defences are overloaded the aliens love to cruise right round the exposed parts with an armada. A perfect run can turn into defeat in a wave: the balance is sometimes so fine that, on one later level, we accidentally assigned a Speed power-up to a missile rather than a black hole, and knew instantly that it would ruin us. Sure enough, the boss killed us with what must have been its last breath.

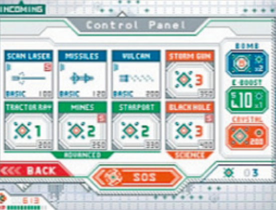
There are one or two structural annoyances, like insisting on a certain number of 'Perfect' grades before unlocking later sections, combined with going back over a given level's tutorial every time you play it. But where *Reflect Missile*'s 200 stages arguably diluted its appeal, *Starship Patrol*'s 30 explore one good idea each and add up to a sizeable package. This is as good as you'll find on DSiWare at the moment, and it'll likely stay that way until Q-Games comes up with another mini-marvel. **[8]**



Destroying enemies releases energy, which has to be collected with the stylus, and sometimes upgrade tokens, which again are manually picked up and assigned. Entirely stylus-based, the controls throughout are precise and intuitive







***Starship Patrol* has little tricks for you to discover about how weapons can work together and how they affect enemies, but the real pleasure is that by and large it lets you find them out for yourself**


MARIO & LUIGI
SUPERSTAR SAGA

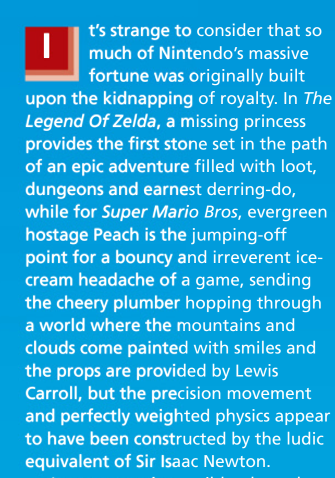
TIME EXTEND

MARIO & LUIGI: SUPERSTAR SAGA

FORMAT: **GAME BOY ADVANCE**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **ALPHADREAM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2003**



It's a family affair: gaming's most famous brothers unite in a quest that pushes the Mario formula to its limit



It's strange to consider that so much of Nintendo's massive fortune was originally built upon the kidnapping of royalty. In *The Legend Of Zelda*, a missing princess provides the first stone set in the path of an epic adventure filled with loot, dungeons and earnest derring-do, while for *Super Mario Bros*, evergreen hostage Peach is the jumping-off point for a bouncy and irreverent ice-cream headache of a game, sending the cheery plumber hopping through a world where the mountains and clouds come painted with smiles and the props are provided by Lewis Carroll, but the precision movement and perfectly weighted physics appear to have been constructed by the ludic equivalent of Sir Isaac Newton.

It was never impossible, then, that with such a common starting point, two genres as disparate as this should eventually converge, but it's still strange that the results would feel so natural. Should a *Super Mario* RPG work? Mario, after all, represents the epitome of moment-to-moment gaming, a joyful romp told in the staccato rhythm of a million bottom-bounces. A perpetual forward-motion machine, what lies behind the Italian plumber is already over with – it barely exists the moment it scrolls off screen – and it's certainly not enough to build an epic story out of. On top of that, the very idea of slowing down such a bubbly headlong jaunt to match the measured heartbeat of an RPG, adding turn-based battles, dialogue-heavy cutscenes and perhaps even a little backtracking, seems like an insane prospect.

Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga isn't the first blending of disciplines – that prize goes to Square's massive *Legend Of The Seven Stars*, the Mushroom Kingdom's initial, rather sickly, excursion into prerendered 3D graphics, and the plumber's unlikely swansong to the 16bit era. That was followed in turn by the clever fairytale narrative of *Paper Mario*, with its fold-out houses and scrappy battles. But *Superstar Saga*, released – almost carelessly – on the ageing Game Boy Advance, still feels like the most satisfying synthesis: the purest and most convincing exploration of Mario as roleplaying hero. Why?

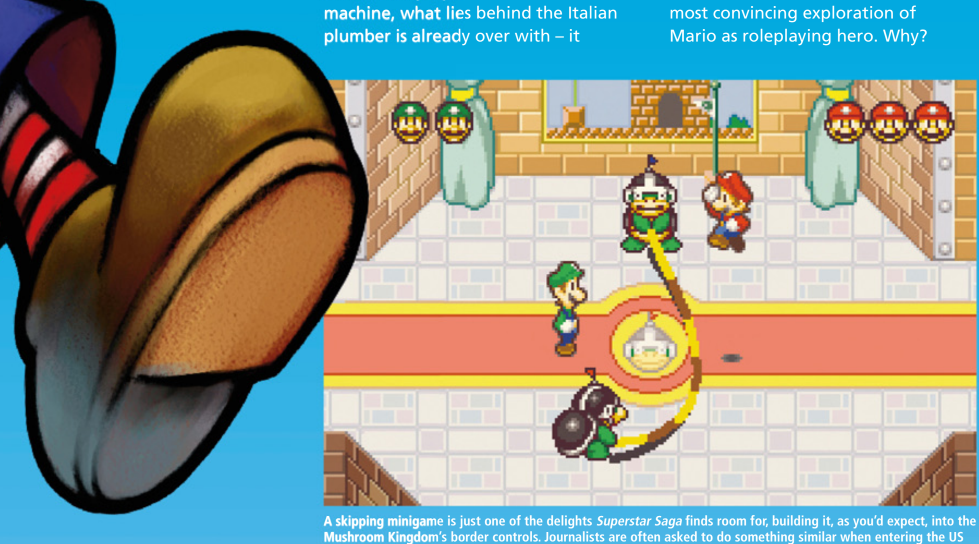
Slowing down such a bubbly headlong jaunt to match the measured heartbeat of an RPG, adding turn-based battles and dialogue-heavy cutscenes, seems like an insane prospect

Inevitably, the appeal is partly visual: free of the voguish 3D modelling that made Square's game age at an alarming rate, and undistracted by the inventive origami presentation of *Paper Mario*, *Superstar Saga* hits an exquisite aesthetic sweet spot. Its sprites belong to the era of classic 2D *Mario*, while its isometric viewpoint echoes the glory days of the JRPG in all their bucolic beauty. To look at a screenshot of *Superstar Saga* is to understand what the game is trying to do before you've even reached your first level, or fought that nimble starter battle.

It's not just down to the texture of the cloth, however: the cut is equally important. *Seven Stars* had some rather classically Square motifs lurking at its heart, while the *Paper Mario* series is helplessly in love with frantic variation. The first game might kick off a tradition of presenting itself as a storybook, moving forward in a calm procession of chapters, but its rotating cast of sidekicks suggests an itchy-footed pursuit of novelty, and the sequel, *The Thousand-Year Door*, takes things one step further, playing out as a series of brilliantly crafted short stories – Murder On The Orient Express one minute, The Wrestler the next – each with their own visual language, and with Mario himself playing different roles as breathlessly as the pace demands.

Both are beautiful pieces of work, but they ultimately come off as anthologies, built to entertain casual players and dazzle the restless. *Superstar Saga* has a longer, slower boil and, as ridiculous as this sounds, remains perhaps the closest we'll ever get to a novelistic approach to the *Super Mario* universe.

And, typically, if it is a novel, it's a fairly strange one. From the hero's first appearance, emerging steaming



A skipping minigame is just one of the delights *Superstar Saga* finds room for, building it, as you'd expect, into the **Mushroom Kingdom**'s border controls. Journalists are often asked to do something similar when entering the US



TRAVELLER'S TALES

Despite its familiar cast, most of *Superstar Saga* is set within the state limits of the magical Beanbean Kingdom. Although the shift in locations is initially rather disappointing, exploring Beanbean is a prolonged visual delight. From the misty, meteor-showered Stardust Fields through to the sinister Chucklehuck Woods (where the planet's only Chuckola Cola factory is located), colours are vivid, and there are plenty of nooks and crannies to explore. The locals aren't a bad bunch, either, most notably the handsome Prince Peasley, who, like any decent royal, loves to make outrageous wagers.







from his shower with a towel wrapped around his waist, through to Luigi parachuting into the desert sands of Teehee Valley (and simultaneously into the pages of *Mario* lore) wedged tightly into one of Princess Peach's dresses, *Superstar Saga* revels in the bizarre and the irreverent. In doing so, it betrays a seemingly self-conscious decision to get a bit closer to famous characters we've never truly needed to know all that well until now. *Luigi's Mansion* kicked off the trend, perhaps, turning its unlikely star, by necessity, into everything Mario wasn't – a quaking coward who finds heroism a burden – but *Superstar Saga* is very happy to build outwards from there, never missing an opportunity to show Luigi running away from danger, cringing at the prospect of a boss fight, or attempting to excuse himself from a potentially difficult task. The Mushroom Kingdom's always been a jolly land of cake parties and kart competitions, but only here does the design genuinely embrace the series' potential for soap-opera zaniness, and the result – due in part to a truly excellent script – is both the most domestic and the most characterful Mario adventure ever.

So for once in a *Super Mario Bros* game, it really is about the brothers. As Mario and Luigi explore the distant lands of the Beanbean kingdom on the trail of the villainous Cackletta, who has stolen Princess Peach's voice, the duo are literally inseparable, steered almost exclusively as a single unit, but each given their own button for jumping (this is a *Mario* game, after all). Meanwhile, the designers build up a masterful range of expanding combos and special moves piece by piece, perfect for getting about the trickier areas, while simultaneously evolving the unique mixture of turn-based tactical choices and action-heavy special attacks that defines the battle system.

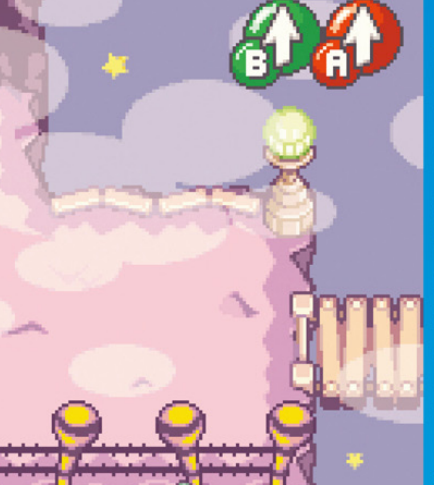
The Mushroom Kingdom's always been a jolly land of cake parties and kart competitions, but only here does the design genuinely embrace the series' potential for soap-opera zaniness

If it's rather more personal than expected, it's also, in its own way, as much of a mischievous trawl through Nintendo's priceless intellectual property as *WarioWare* is – each new destination on the brothers' map resulting in a dizzying range of in-jokes and special guest appearances, from the trademark jump that everyone demands to see Mario perform before accepting that it truly is the famous plumber, to the entirely unexpected appearance of Professor E Gadd, creator of FLUDD and the Poltergust 3000, turning up this time in the role of coffee shop proprietor.

Cameos alone can't entirely explain *Superstar Saga*'s warm sense of déjà vu, however – the persistent notion that this quirky aside of a game is somehow picking up on threads the greater series has dropped, returning to old territory that fans themselves were perhaps not ready to leave behind. Despite its inventions and deviations, AlphaDream's adventure actually feels like the most traditional *Mario* game in years: it's not just an elegantly simplified starter pack like *New Super Mario Bros*, nor a hub-based playground like *Mario 64* and all the subsequent 3D games. For once, Mario is going somewhere again, setting off on a sprawling journey for the first time since *Super Mario World* and its massive multi-continent map. *Superstar Saga* is a return to the travelogue side of the *Mario* series, driven forward through its increasingly unlikely plot twists and minigames by a tangible sense of following a quest, of being wrapped



Boss battles are grindy, but make up for it, mostly, with truly memorable designs and attack patterns. The game's final battle is a mammoth half-hour undertaking, however



Platforming is a large part of the game, whether the brothers are separated for individual challenges or navigating a dungeon while tethered together

up in a globetrotting mission, while regular platform interludes serve as the equivalent of flashbacks, even restaging some iconic *Mario* moments – not least a reinvention of *Donkey Kong*'s famous first level, complete with rolling barrels to jump over.

If the last few years of game development have had a trend beyond the increased growth of the casual market, it's been the baffling death and simultaneous rebirth of the roleplaying game. Traditional JRPGs are increasingly niche, still made in their hundreds while fighting for a vanishing amount of DS shelf space, but the ideas that once made the genre synonymous with videogames in general are steadily pouring intravenously into everything from racing games to puzzle titles. And even shooters, that most immediate and contemporary of genres, are getting in on the act, with *COD4*'s levelling and classes demonstrating the solid commercial sense of giving players something to shoot for as well as shoot at, while the muddle of stats, perks and loot drops of Gearbox's deranged gun piñata *Borderlands* serves to lift it above its hillbilly Mad Max setting.

So should it be any surprise to discover that Mario got there first? He always does, of course. Ahead of the curve when it comes to side-scrolling, non-linear levels, analogue controls and physics integration, Mario's also allowed players to revel in the cross-bred world of dungeon structures and character maxing before too many other people did. A great RPG, filled with great RPG decisions (which overalls to wear for the biggest defence bonus? Which stat, from speed to moustache integrity, to pour those vital skill points into?), and a great *Mario* game, flooded with pastel colours, quirky, childish landscapes and a cast of charming crackpots. *Superstar Saga* is one of the series' most rewarding genre experiments. By blending *Mario*'s deepest traditions with some entirely foreign mechanics, AlphaDream broadened the scope of the series, yet, somehow, brought it home again too.

The game's opening section revels in its stars' domestic life. They may be superheroes, but they still need to peg out the laundry every now and then

TAPPING THE SAUCE

Prior to its work on the *Mario & Luigi* series, AlphaDream scored a quirky hit with the unlikely sounding *Tomato Adventure*. Set in the Ketchup Kingdom and based around the adventures of 'droppers' (social outcasts snubbed by their peers because they don't like tomatoes), the RPG has a number of elements that may sound familiar to fans of *Superstar Saga*. Besides the nutty plot and bright, isometric visuals, *Tomato Adventure*'s turn-based battles also feature action-oriented minigame components that presumably provided the basis for *Mario & Luigi*'s timing-based specials. Only released in Japan and too text-heavy for most importers, if nothing else, this oddball RPG could provide the *Mother 3* fan translation team with its next objective.



THE MAKING OF... PLANETSIDE

Air support, mechanised infantry, and thousands of players, many on dial-up modems: Planetside was an MMOFPS ahead of its time

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **2003**

"Only the dead," said Plato, "have seen the end of war." Reports from the frontline on the planet of Auraxis suggest that he had it slightly wrong. In the three-way dust-up between the Terran Republic, New Conglomerate and Vanu Sovereignty, death is simply a prelude to a respawn. And in *Planetside*, you die a lot.

Sony Online Entertainment's massively multiplayer online firstperson shooter (MMOFPS) is a forever war that's slaughtered billions since it began six years ago. It's a conflict that sprawls across multiple continents, guided by capricious commanders who come and go. The frontline shifts with dizzying regularity, today's friendly bases are tomorrow's orbital strike targets, and the only dependable constant is death. Will the last player to leave *Planetside* please turn off the spawn tubes?

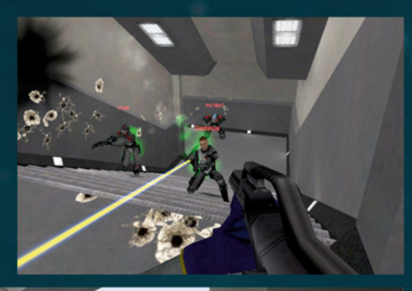
Back in 2003, the FPS genre had lots of fights but few bona fide wars. *Battlefield 1942* had 64-player maps. *Tribes 2* servers sometimes stretched to 128. *Planetside* dwarfed them both. "The server could handle anything up to around 5,000 players," recalls executive producer **Rich Lawrence**, who oversaw development at SOE's San Diego offices. "The density we could get in a single combat area was around 500 players. We realised that the feel of combat increased the more players you had." And in *Planetside*, the feel of combat was pivotal.

The game may have been massive, but the dev team wasn't. Development began in 2000 with a group of 25 programmers, artists and designers; most MMOGs drew upon the skills of two to four times that many staff. "An MMOFPS was something that had never been done before," recalls creative director **Kevin McCann**, "and I think Sony were wary of pouring too much money into it."

Given the limits of the technology at the time of release, *Planetside*'s scope was incredibly, perhaps even foolishly, ambitious. Each game server ran on ten Pentium III PCs. "There was no unique server hardware," recalls Lawrence wryly. "It was just off-the-rack kind of equipment. To achieve the feel of an army on that kind of hardware was a tremendously consumptive technical problem. We spent, oh, I don't know, probably two years of focus technology development on that alone." With a sizeable percentage of players connecting on dial-up modems, bandwidth was a killer, and networking issues ate up a huge chunk of the dev team's time. "It was a tremendous



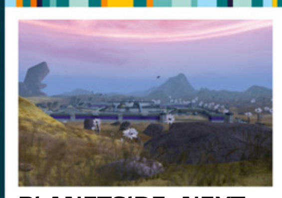
Planetside's pace leaves little time for the chit-chat of most MMOGs. Yet team play is built in with a well-designed squad system encouraging grunts, engineers, medics and infiltrators to buddy up for experience points



Base and tower sieges feature hectic running battles through corridors and staircases (right). Your empire's sanctuary (below) offers some respite, but the dev team acknowledges that these sparsely populated hubs aren't enjoyable to spend time in







PLANETSIDE: NEXT

Talk of a *Planetside* sequel has been swirling around the internet ether for years, but it was only in October 2009 that a blog post from SOE president John Smedley made a sequel, currently titled *Planetside: Next*, semi-official. Rich Lawrence won't comment on specifics other than to say: "We still have some of the original *PS* team at SOE and we're always interested in leveraging our strengths." But he also draws comparisons with upcoming PS3 online shooter *MAG* and its 256-player battles: "I know that they're solving many of the problems that we had."



headache," says Lawrence. "We would sit and talk about ways we could slice just two bits of information from the data stream that was going to the player."

The technical challenges threw *Planetside*'s core essentials into sharp relief. Early plans for PVE content and an in-game economy were quickly stripped back. One of the biggest losers, says McCann, was the AI. Originally, Auraxis was going to be inhabited by a non-player race called Shifters. "It was a bit Starship Troopers or Aliens," McCann says. "The Shifters were these animalistic creatures ranging from the size of a horse to huge beasts of dinosaur proportions. They lived in hives and if players didn't deal with them they'd grow more powerful. The idea was to give players a break from the combat and give them something to do during non-peak hours."

The problem was that the AI behaviour needed to be more complex than it was in a mission-based MMOG like Sony's flagship title *EverQuest*. The Shifters were intelligent enemies that jumped out of holes, attacked players and took cover. "We wanted pack behaviour and a bunch of other stuff to make sure this was AI that complemented a firstperson shooter experience and not a fantasy MMOG experience," says McCann. Sadly, so much time was spent on networking issues that the Shifters, much to everyone's disappointment, were mothballed.

In the end, the Shifters' absence didn't detract from the finished game. Even without PVE content, *Planetside* delivered a stirringly atmospheric feel. The permafrost wastelands of continents like Ceryshen or the verdant swamps of Hossin gave an epic scope to the conflict, aided no end by the driving stoicism of Don Ferrone's martial score.

It helped too that the game's three different empires were so well drawn. The Terrans, New Conglomerate and Vanu (dubbed 'Elmos', 'Smurfs' and 'Barneys' by players thanks to their red, blue and purple uniforms) were perfectly distinctive. Empire-specific vehicles and weapons made the skill-trees for each seem varied. It also led to endless debates over balance; even today the Vanu's 'disco-ball' Lasher rifle can ignite heated argument among veterans.

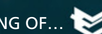
Still, no one moaned about *Planetside*'s great achievement: its sprawling intensity. Lawrence can still remember his first proper fight, in a playtest before the beta release, running over the crest of a hill to encounter a bridge battle being fought by SOE's employees. "There was gunfire going everywhere, explosions going off and dropships flying around as the bridge was assaulted. I looked over at my lead programmer and was like: 'Wow, this is *Planetside*!' I promptly got blown away, but it was clear the scale of what we were doing was unique."

"I said to my lead programmer, 'Wow, this is Planetside!' I promptly got blown away, but it was clear we were doing something unique"

Any MMOG world only really comes to life when it goes live. With a peak of around 75,000 players, *Planetside* was a minnow compared to *World Of Warcraft*'s multi-millions of subscribers. Yet, six years on, the epic scope of its battles has never been matched. Although neither the frantic pace nor the awkward chat client encouraged the social aspect familiar from traditional MMOGs like SOE's key property *EverQuest*, *Planetside* still created a sense of camaraderie by actively encouraging squad play and giving lone wolves short shrift.

"We didn't want *Planetside* to turn into pure chaos with 500 players running around," McCann laughs. "We gave the players objectives and then let them decide what to do." The levelling system offered committed players the chance to become Command Rank tacticians, guiding the deployment of troops.

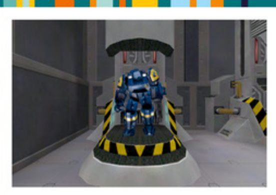
McCann recalls being impressed by the level of strategy outfits (*Planetside*'s guild equivalent) employed. A dedicated outfit of players armed with a Galaxy transport could hot-drop on to an enemy generator and turn the tide of a war. A column of Magrider





Original plans to vary base architecture across continents were abandoned as networking problems sapped valuable resources. But at least the vehicle pool offers empire-specific tanks like this New Conglomerate Vanguard, designed for two players





MECH WAR MOANS

Any decent MMOG needs rolling updates. *Planetside*'s were always hit and miss. First up were the caverns of Core Combat (subterranean war zones that proved sparsely populated), then a map restructure. Most controversial of all was Aftershock, which added *Mechwarrior*-style Battle Frame Robotics (BFRs) into the game. The lumbering, overpowered machines annoyed pretty much everyone, mainly because they were hard to obtain and even harder to take down. Even SOE's John Smedley, in a recent blog post, asked fans to cease griping: "Stop sending the 'please don't put BFRs in *PS Next*' emails. They aren't in there."

hover-tanks could repel a tower siege. Yet nothing was quite as impressive as watching AMS drivers dream up new places to park and cloak their mobile spawn point vehicles. "Those guys could be really creative!"

Over time, though, the endless nature of *Planetside*'s war created virtual combat fatigue. "That was definitely, if I can take the egg on my own face, a mistake," admits Lawrence with surprising candour. "One of the things I wanted to get in, but didn't, was a system where players had a greater impact in terms of the rules of the war." Too busy fighting technical issues, the dev team sacrificed plans to allow players who won a continent the ability to restructure its supply lines, bases and defences. As *Planetside* aged, belated and controversial add-on packs (see 'Mech war moans') couldn't stem the drip of player desertions.

For all its flaws, *Planetside* deserves a medal of honour for its staggering ambition. It proved that not all MMOGs had to follow the Tolkein-esque, quest-based template. "I think my corporate overlords would have enjoyed making much more money on it," Lawrence admits when quizzed about *Planetside*'s legacy, "but it was successful in that we created an MMOFPS, something unheard of at the time."

It has also earned a reputation. Even today, veterans of Auraxis hold the game in high regard. "A lot of MMOGs give a tremendous amount to players but take a lot in terms of players' investment," muses the producer. "It's not uncommon for players to reach this point where they have to divorce the game: 'I played that for a while but, *ugh*, I'm done with it now'. *Planetside* players tend to say: 'I played that for a long time and had a lot of fun'. They don't have to go through the same divorce proceedings. As a playerbase they're really unusual guys in the MMOG industry."

With mass online battles still a tantalising prospect for many shooter fans, *Planetside* stands as a testament to what could be. It's also proof that being ahead of the game can be a thankless task. A pioneer is, after all, often the guy with arrows – or plasma orbs – in his back.

Even the cows game.

The word is out. Texas is a national leader in the video game industry.   uilding a solid foundation for gaming, the Lone Star State brings together a Texas-sized talent pool, a superior infrastructure and an unmatched quality of life. Production incentives for game developers equal up to 5% of in-state spending, as well as sales tax exemptions for items and services used to produce games. In addition to a thriving gaming community, Texas is home to motion capture studios and software & hardware manufacturers who strengthen the state's ties to gaming. Come to Texas, where gamers are *moooving*!

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REGION SPECIFIC:

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There are a lot of Texan stereotypes that came to mind during our visit to the region, but the most striking event took place on the first morning of our stay. It snowed. It almost never snows in Texas, and though the state became gripped with a fear of transport chaos (ring any bells?), it was a signal to throw away whatever preconceptions we had. Because Texas is more than the Lone Star state and it's more than the home of id Software in Dallas (though the studio behind *Doom* remains an important part), and more than the home of Origin in Austin (though it is sadly missed).

Texas is the home of a new generation of developers, from an astonishingly vibrant indie scene forged by new stars such as Newtoy, Twisted Pixel and Semi Secret Software, to the huge strides being made by more established companies such as Arkane Studios and Sony Online Entertainment. Always the home state of companies who do their own thing – look at the history of 3D Realms or Gathering Of Developers, which admittedly took things to extremes – companies such as Total Immersion and Trion World Network keep that spirit alive by charting new paths in MMOGs and serious games.

In fact, Texas is like those snowflakes that surprised us so much on our first morning – it reveals more and more the closer you get.



























GAMING'S BIGGER IN TEXAS

With many frontiers still to conquer, gaming is here to stay in the Lone Star state

If you want an example of how things are different in Texas, just step off the plane at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport between gates 7-12. There you'll find – at least until the end of January – an exhibit dedicated to the videogames developed in the area. It features everything from the punched paper Richard Garriott used to develop the very first *Akalabeth*, to design docs for *Deus Ex* – all behind glass for safe keeping, of course (painful when one exhibit is a copy of a design doc for the unreleased *Ultima Underworld 3*).

"Culturally, Austin is really embracing games," says **Frank Roan**, general manager at Austin-based serious game developer Total Immersion. "It's amazing to think the airport in the capital of a state could be showing the history of local development – and it wasn't just one display, but several. I was surprised to see it, but it made me appreciate just how rich that history is."

And it's that history – from the early days of Origin in Austin and 3D Realms in Dallas – that has really driven the new generation of developers in Texas, even if these industry legends are now sadly departed. With almost every developer featured here, it was a locally developed game that brought them to Texas or gave them a reason to found their company in the state – mistakenly or not.

"I moved here in 1993 because of Origin," Arkane Studios' **Harvey Smith** tells us. "*Ultima Underworld* was my favourite game, and I mistakenly believed that they had designed and developed it here – but actually they just produced it and it was











created by Looking Glass in Boston! Based on this misunderstanding I moved here and fell in love with the community. Austin is the capital of Texas, but it's also a college town. It's big enough to have some amenities, but it's still small enough to feel comfortable. I moved over to the [San Francisco] Bay Area to make a game once and, while I like the game I made there, I made sure I got back as fast as I could! One project later I realised I couldn't afford a house there and it took me an hour to get to work and get back."

"No one seems to think anything happens east of the Rockies in the videogame business in the US. I think the heartland is a better place to make videogames"

"No one seems to think anything happens east of the Rockies in the videogame business in the US," argues **Ron Jenkins**, deputy director of development and external affairs at The Guildhall at SMU. "I think that the heartland is a better place to make videogames, from distribution to technology. In Dallas we had *Doom* and *Quake*. *Ghosbusters* was just developed by Terminal Reality. One of the things I'd like to change is this idea of 'Austin or Dallas' and really bring the idea of Texas as a whole to the front." And in considering that, we can't forget Houston, the third part of 'The Texas Triangle' of videogame





development. A representative from TimeGate Studios – based in Sugar Land, a suburb 20 miles outside of Houston – makes it clear the city offers the same benefits the rest of Texas sees. "Houston is a melting pot not only of cultural diversity but also types of business: technology, oil, medicine, media, even space exploration. Sometimes the right talent for a videogame may be found outside the industry."

Indeed, the Texas game industry is a constantly evolving beast, with an event that could have devastated another videogame community – this year's closure by Microsoft of hundreds-strong veteran RTS developer Ensemble Studios – instead creating an opportunity, with over five new developers, *Words With Friends* creator Newtoy among them, springing up in Dallas from the ashes.

"Just from a straight-up economic stand point, Texas is a good place to work. We have a decent wage base here. We've got a good technological base"

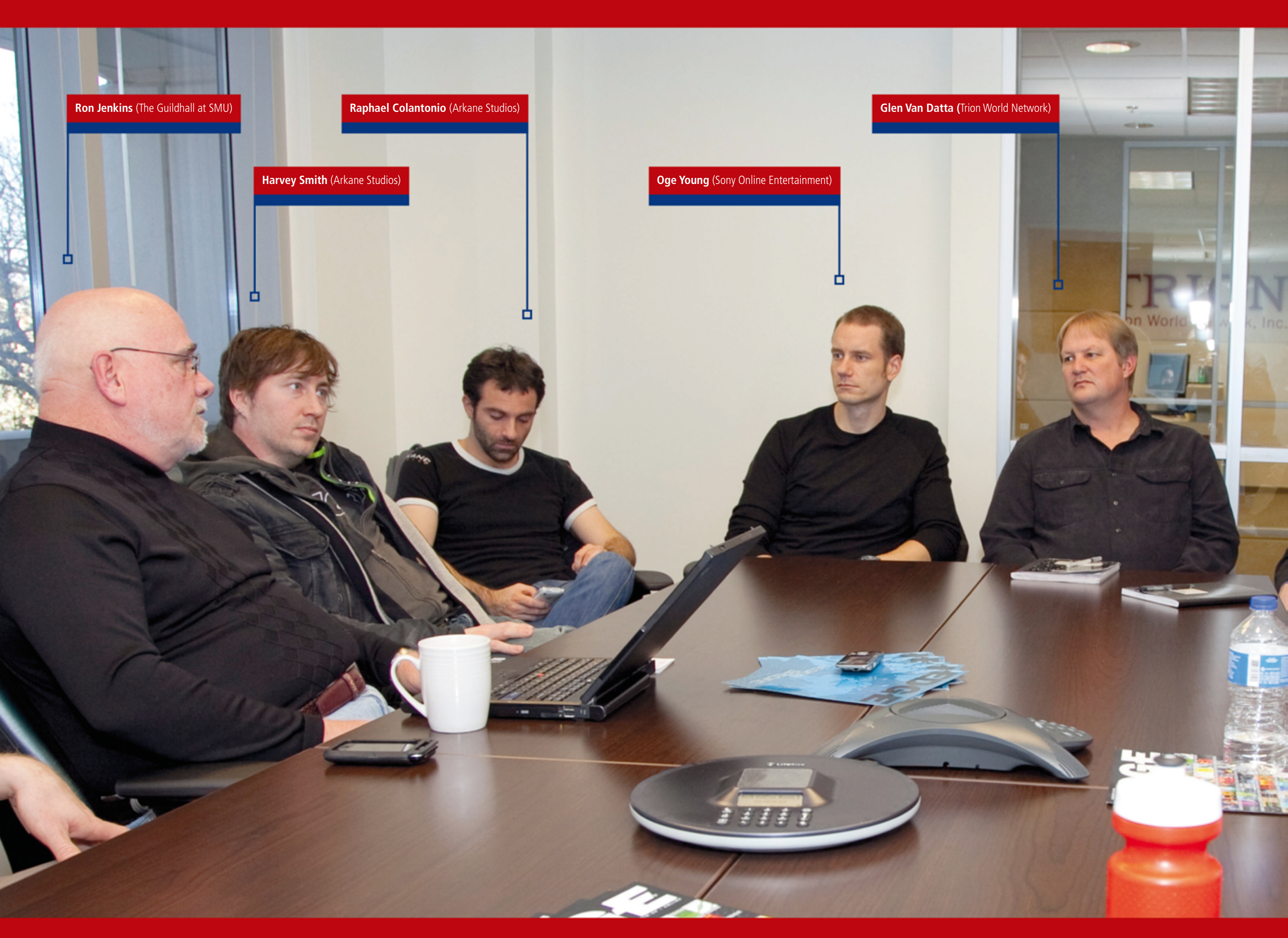
One man who understands the complicated ebb and flow of the Texas game industry as well as any is **Tom Mustaine**, a veteran developer and founder of Escalation Studios, who has seen (and been part of) companies such as Gathering Of Developers and Ritual Entertainment.



"Just from a straight-up economic stand point, as a developer here, the state of Texas is a good place to work," he says. "We have a decent wage base here. We've got a good technological base. There's no state income tax. It's not ridiculously over priced like it is in California – you're not going to end up wasting tons and tons of your money on a tiny little apartment. You can have a really nice, big house. So for people who come here to work, it's honestly kind of a welcome surprise, and they end up just sticking around long term. There's an interesting culture, an interesting nightlife. Developers around here really latch on to Texas."

Of course, the really important question for any fledgling developer looking to set up a new base is what incentives Texas can offer to videogame developers. Since the governorship of Rick Perry – who introduced a videogame liaison for the Texas Film Commission in 2006 – there are now tax credits for game companies with a certain level of staff, though they're admittedly far smaller than the headline-grabbing incentives that are offered in the Canadian provinces.

"That was one of the reasons we moved here," explains Twisted Pixel CEO **Michael Wilford**, who moved his company – and all its staff – from Indiana in 2006. "Incentives were available but, more importantly, at the time we were considering Austin, the governor was speaking at E3, so it was clear games were important to him. While it's nice to have incentives, what's more important is that we're important to Texas – not a fleeting interest."



DON'T MESS

Texas game developers aren't the cowboys of legend, but a driving force behind the growth and cultural impact of the entire game industry

Perhaps at one point, Texans were the stoically silent cowboys seen in westerns, but today they're friendly. And they like to talk – a lot. Though this meeting in a conference room in north Austin was the first time many of them had met, these developers – Trion World Network's **Chris Mancil** and **Glen Van Datta**, **David Bettner** of Newtoy, **Ron Jenkins** of The Guildhall at SMU, Arkane's **Harvey Smith** and **Raphael Colantonio**, **Michael Wilford** of Twisted Pixel games, **Adam Saltsman** of Semi Secret Software, **Frank Roan** of Total Immersion, **Leo Olebe** of BioWare and **Wes Yanagi** and **Oge Young** of Sony Online Entertainment, with **Leah Smith** representing the









WITH TEXAS

Office of Texas Governor Rick Perry, and **Hunter Woodlee** of Controlled Chaos – dove straight into an open, honest and occasionally heated debate on gaming's place in culture and what Texas can do to be part of it. There was little for us to do but soak it up.

Harvey Smith: It's interesting to consider the value of creative cultures. A while back I was reading something that asked, 'What is the value of having Broadway in New York? What is the value of Silicon Valley? How do you create that, or put a price tag on it?' The answer is that you can't. It just has to evolve because of the people there and the energy that they have. There are a lot of great games out of Dallas but my favourites come from the time when the Dallas community was very focused around shooters. It felt like something new was being birthed there; a vernacular, a style of game, even the attitude. Things are a lot more fragmented now. It's one of those things that interests me – how a culture evolves. There are several hot spots in Texas now, but how do we nurture them into something like a Broadway.

I was talking to some friends recently about starting up a little art game project on the side, and it occurred to me that the best way to do that might be to get a few people together and start up a collective, like my Montreal friend Heather Kelly's Kokoromi collective, that runs the yearly Gamma indie game event. I realised that this wouldn't only be a good vehicle for me to make this little art game, but what if we built it up organically into a grassroots volunteer organisation? Something that we could own ourselves, invest in and have control over. I was thinking about this recently because the culture we have here, as much as it has changed over time, is important, and it's not guaranteed that it will always be strong, and it'll be hard to recreate if we lose it.

Ron Jenkins: I think the other thing is that developers are so busy. They keep their heads down and can't look up…

Michael Wilford: I'm surprised there are so many here right now! [Laughter]

Photography: **Caroline Mowry**

RJ: But like you said, it would be wonderful to do outreach and get involved in the greater community so people would feel better about what we do, but we don't have any time to do it. How many of you guys can spare the hour to think about this rather than focus on keeping your business going?
HS: I think one of the things that would help us locally is if one of the schools in Austin would start a programme, not a small programme but a big programme. I keep waiting for the University of Texas to really embrace games, because it's one of the most well funded educational facilities in America. There's Warren Spector's class attached to Film and Television, but one of the reasons a culture becomes so vibrant and echoes for years is because there was an educational facility there that spins off startups and has all these young people with energy pouring in…
Oge Young: Instead of an educational facility we had Origin! [Laughter] It really spun off a bunch of people who were very motivated to stay here in Texas, and that's a big reason why this industry is here. You have people who, even if things go soft with their studio, try as hard as they can to stay in Texas, and if they have to leave to stay in the industry they get back here as soon as possible. I've lost count of the number of people who, when they apply for jobs, say: "Things are going great here in LA, great game, company, but I need to get back to Texas."



"I've lost count of the number of people who say: 'Things are going great here in LA, but I need to get back to Texas'"

Frank Roan: It took me eight years to get back! [Laughter]
RJ: The reason that the University of Texas can't do that is the tenured system of universities. Everyone has to be a PhD. We were really criticised for creating our course in 2002 – you know, it's not a serious industry, it's not a serious profession, it's too narrow – and universities also have to struggle with what school is it under? Engineering, Art, Film and TV? Universities traditionally don't talk well between schools. If you look at university programmes in the US, they are made up of four or five professors, and then 20 to 30 adjuncts [non-permanent teachers].

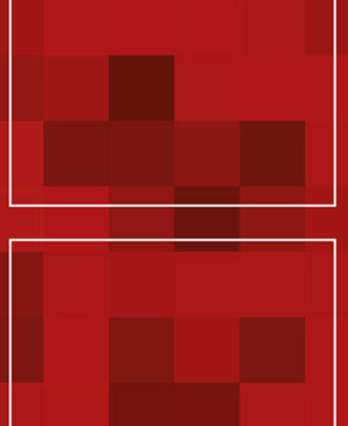
The reason we got lucky is that we don't answer to a school, and so we have 14 full-time faculty made up of industry professionals – ten years of experience and at least three shipped games – we don't require PhDs. The University of Texas has wonderful things about it, but bridging that gap, any major university is tied by the tenured system.
Leah Smith: I think as a whole the state is third in the nation for videogame graduates. So we're not doing that badly.
FR: It's an active conversation. We met with the provost just a month ago, and they say they'd love to run a course, but the universities are strapped for money. They say, "Sure, but give us $30 million to do it."

So we camp on The Guildhall at SMU's doorstep each time there are graduates. Right now we'll look at University of Texas's graduates if they've shipped a few games.
RJ: Our course is such a different proposition. To be accepted you have to have a 4.0 GPA, you have to spend $60,000, and you've got to move to Plano, Texas of all places. And the breakdown of our school is not Texas. It's split evenly across the United States and ten per cent are international students. One of the things to look at is the public schools can be more affordable. University of Texas may have many great programmes, but if you look where the graduates go, they don't go into videogames. They go into animation, film, video. We offer a graduate program with large team productions. If the course doesn't have a large team experience – ten or 15 people with their heads down working on a game – then when those graduates go to a









studio they're going to still need to be trained.
Hunter Woodlee: Having the Guildhall at SMU has been very valuable to us as a company. To be candid, it's because you can get a lot of inexpensive labour and people hungry for the work, and I think no matter how good your senior employees are, there are sometimes too many tasks to handle. It's been very valuable to us to have kids who want to get in and get experience, and be able to hire them as contractors.
David Bettner: We've had a very similar experience at Newtoy. We're about 20 minutes down the street from SMU, and one of our artists is actually an adjunct professor there, so we've worked with a lot of the student artists and been able to interview the programmers from graduating tasks – it's been pretty fantastic.
Wes Yanagi: I think ultimately, it's all about people – the team – and that comes down to how can you attract people to that area, and that's one of the things about Texas. It's a good convergence of art and tech – especially in Austin – and that's been a big draw for us.
RJ: You know, something that we see a problem with is artists. To get someone from a studio art programme or a fine art programme to consider that game art is a proper expression of the artistic framework. You get a lot of people who are comic book artists or illustrators, but we're not reaching that wider DNA base. That's something we're worried about – that the DNA base is too narrow, and that it needs to be wider so that games can be more interesting to more people.
HS: A lot of people have been discussing the value or not of cultural legitimacy and acceptance lately. Chris Hecker [formerly of Maxis] just gave a talk on it recently, and there were some debatable points, but in general one of the benefits of being legitimised in the eyes of the mainstream population. If you ask the average mom and pop if movies are an art form they would say "yes" even though there are many shitty movies made every year. And even if you ask me if TV is an art form, I'd say, "Yes, I love Deadwood, Mad Men," they're amazing shows, but of course there's Everybody Loves Raymond too. There are good and bad products, but no one questions the legitimacy of the form. But if you ask someone about comics, well, clearly there are brilliant comics such as Black Hole or Blankets, Pulitzer prize-winning works of literary and visual art, but most people would say, "No, it's just a bunch of guys in Spandex beating each other up." For videogames, it would be an even smaller number of people who would quote *Braid* or *Flower* or one of the obvious art games.

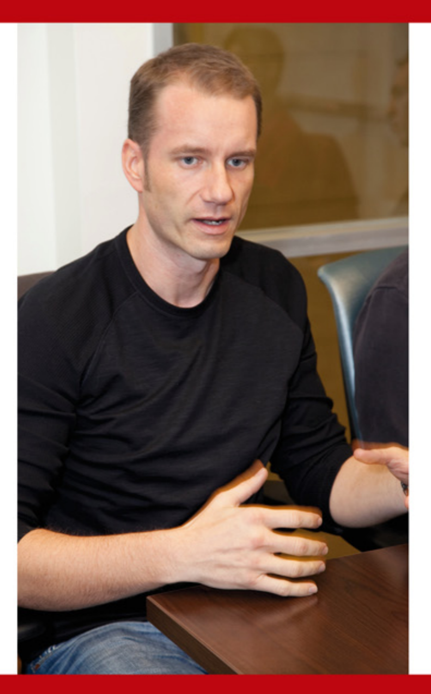
So one of the benefits of cultural legitimacy for videogames would certainly be a wider net – we could bring in more fine art people or more people with diverse backgrounds.



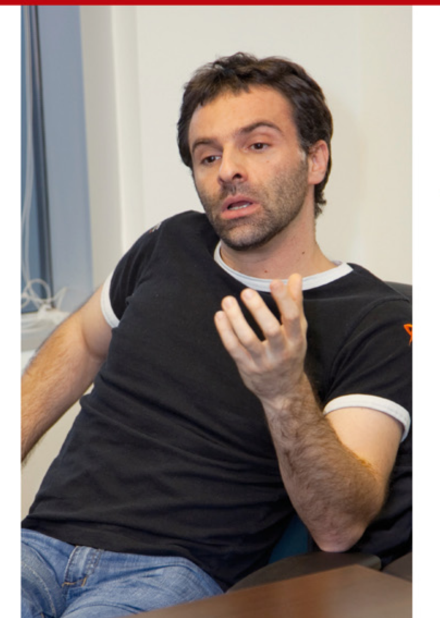
Adam Saltsman: I think with videogames, though, the problem is that nobody knows how to make them. You either know how to copy a game that someone else has already made, or it's trial and error until you get something playable that not everyone hates. No one knows how to design a game, so no one knows how to make a game.
HS: It's changing every cycle! How could you have taught the Wii Remote before it came out? How could you have taught MMOs or social gaming? The scope is changing yearly. I mean, if you ask me what the feature that has finally come to fruition this year is it's co-op. If you look at *Left 4 Dead*, *Modern Warfare 2*, co-op is finally here. We can look at it now and we can say: "Oh, there are some powerful blueprints here." Or look at *Borderlands*, made in Dallas. Brilliant co-op game. But, next year, what is it going to be? Something new?
AS: It's a heavy double-hitter. If we don't have cultural legitimacy and we don't know what to do, pulling in the people who might know what to do – or have a really cool, different way of looking at it – is difficult.
Chris Mancil: But cultural legitimacy is a generational thing. Sure, we or our parents might not get it, but I don't think there's a 12-year-old kid alive that doesn't think we're the coolest people on the planet.

AS: But what do they consider it? There's definitely a difference between kids loving to play *Call Of Duty* and understanding that this thing that we have is something that can be pursued as an art.
CM: But how is that different from any other art?
AS: It's different because you have Sundance which attracts passionate film artists from all over the world who want to be or are part of the main industry.
Raphael Colantonio: No offence to the movie guys, but when it comes to cinematics in games? That's the easy part.
AS: There may be a generational thing at play in all of this – maybe when we're all fat old retired guys we can go teach…
RJ: Yep! [Laughter] I'm the only one old enough here to have seen the whole thing out from the beginning, and I encouraged my kids to play games because we thought they were educational and would teach you how to use a computer, and now my son-in-law and my grandson – who's six – sit down each night and play *Lego Star Wars* and things like that. It's the first generation that is completely immersed in the culture.

But creative and technology innovation centres need public sector support. We feel that the US is just driving nails into our innovation coffin. We get support from Texas, but we don't get anywhere near the support we need to start working on innovation. The Canadians spent $40 million dollars starting a university; in Scotland, videogames reach a national education standard, even in France videogames are a historical part of culture.
AS: Admittedly France is that way for animation and comics, too.
RJ: Right. The other thing that we've started is an indie game challenge, and we're trying to be the Sundance. I know the IGF has done a lot of wonderful things but 12 teams will fly into DICE and they'll present their games to publishers. So we're reaching that kind of Sundance 'ideal' of people living in their Volkswagen off a credit card and trying to get their film picked up. And I've seen these games, and they're good. It's amazing to see people being rewarded for that kind of sacrifice. And that's the kind of thing where if we had the public sector involvement we could nourish. The public sector has not supported games enough in Texas or in the United States and we're going to lose the war. Europe, Asia, Canada are going to take over and take it away from us.
FR: It's a maturing thing. The average age of the games industry goes up a year every year. And up until now we've actively promoted ourselves like a freak show. I get it, but I'm involved in the angel investor networks who are trying to invest in these things. People look at us and that's what they see. So I think as we mature and our image becomes more about being an art form and a serious business schools and universities are going to start taking us seriously. Look at the dropout rates. There's a 30 per cent dropout rate in high schools and we're ranked 27th in science and technology in the entire world. Programmes are having a massive reduction in applications. But when schools add a game programme there are too many applicants!
FR: These numbers are very compelling in terms of how we need to change our image and how we represent ourselves. The film industry and the like have PR firms that are working to present themselves as serious business – it's not by accident! I've found as a manager you need to actively manage your culture. It's odd to realise now that I'm in my 40s that I'm a steward of the industry here. It's up to us!
RC: It is a generational thing. Twenty years ago the president had never played games and now he plays Wii, and the next president might love them. If you play games, you understand them.
FR: It's not a purely altruistic thing. The guys in the Alameda office ask me how I've managed to grow to 50 people so fast and it's simply because we've put







"What's scary is that movies evolve super slowly, but games are evolving so rapidly that every year is like a revolution"

the time in to grow a healthy culture. Even a couple of hours a month to promote these things, it's a rising tide.
AS: I think it's one of the things I get distracted by, what you said about making a "serious art form and a serious business". I don't know if you can really do both. I'm not sure that when a university has a film programme it has it because it's a good business idea or if because it's a legitimate cultural form. I think that comes out in a lot of our games industry events – first that they're called games industry events, they're not called game art events. What is our GDC? Is it really just an electronics convention, or is it Sundance and the Oscars in one?
FR: If you look at the Venn diagram of personal to professional art, the goal of art is to get these two circles to match completely. But if you don't the one that is going to win out is professional art, because it pays the bills. If you can afford to pay for your personal craft and not worry about the sales figures then great, but the costs have gone up so much. We do have this renaissance right now with digital distribution that companies like Twisted Pixel can go off and shun the publishers and make what they want, but I think we definitely need to try and support both.
RJ: How many people here hate the Spike Awards?
MW: They've, er, got some good games nominated this year? [*'Splosion Man* was nominated for best independent game.]
RJ: The Spike Awards, which is, again, our public persona, is the biggest joke embarrassment. It's all the stereotypes of what people think is bad about games, and it's supported by the ESA and the major publishers.
HS: You know, I've never seen them.
Everyone: Don't! [Laughter]
HS: I just don't think that game developers down on the ground really care about it that much.
AS: Well, I think we talk about it for a few days afterwards – you know: "That was really crass, even for us."
HS: Well, one of my friends, Brenda Braithwaite, is a videogame designer with about 20 years of experience and she's recently done stuff that no one can question if it's art or not. She's been taking art history lately and studying people like Pollock, and she says the more she learns about art history, the more she recognises in the way games are going now. I think it's unfortunate that we have super-crass award shows that we're embarrassed by, but I'm sure it's just growing pains.
MW: It's a good point, I think. A lot of people complain that universities don't have what it takes to train game developers adequately – well, film went through the same thing…
AS: The idea that film would have a narrative in it was a joke for about 20 years. It was thought of as a back-room thing where when you get done watching strippers you watch a train that they've taken multiple photos of.
HS: Even at one point the idea that the English language could be used for art was a joke. Everything was in Latin.
RC: But what's scary is that movies evolve super slowly. They barely managed to become an established form within a hundred years, and I'm not sure I could tell a big difference in form between a movie made ten years ago and made today. But games are evolving so rapidly that every year is like a revolution.
HS: Warren Spector came out of film history in

New York and I remember working with him and he said, "Man, every project we do it's like the camera is being reinvented." That was in '93!

AS: I didn't mean to say earlier that art and business were separate and they had to fight each other. I think that we just need to understand that there's art, there's technology, and there's business, and I don't mean art as in concept but in terms of design and figuring out what games are, and if we don't understand that these three things are going at once these things happen where we only make FPS games for six to eight years, we only make technology… The art form stagnates. It's just good to be aware that these are different forces doing different things.

RJ: And we see education addressing that. Because we will see programmes that will be called interactive media, and they will study the art and the appreciation of videogames and what they are as a social or artistic force. Then you'll have courses like ours that will be for people who intend to be developers. There will be branches of gaming where people are going to use them not for the commercial aspect but for their power of expression. And technology like XNA and Unity are going to allow people inexpensive and usable ways to experiment that way.

Leo Olebe: I think the whole thing is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right? Trying to understand or conceptualise what is art or is not art – Spike TV good or bad – has its own fallacies. My parents thought I was nuts for playing on the Commodore 64 and they probably still think I'm a little nuts, but it's what I do, and frankly I don't care if people conceive what I do as art or not. A long time ago people probably thought Stan Lee was nuts, but Spider-Man is now considered the greatest thing since sliced bread. My mom has been in education for 50 years now and she just did a conference in California where she was trying to teach professors of the impact of games like *World Of Warcraft* on the way people learn. And the reality is that all of these professors were completely dumbfounded. They didn't get it – "videogames are crazy and evil." But from my experience and because it's something my mom has become passionate about, I think it just takes time. It's all good as long as you're happy about what you're creating.





"Very complete, polished, high-quality products is the standard we should try and attain no matter what you're going for"

CM: I absolutely agree. I'm less concerned about what outsiders think about it, but I am very concerned about what our peers think about it, so this strive for very complete, polished, high-quality products is the standard we should try and attain no matter what flavour you're going for.

HS: I kind of agree with that, even if I was sort of playing devil's advocate earlier. After Hecker's speech I got involved into a fairly heated debate with many of my industry friends on Facebook and a lot of the points here were broached, but I took the position that I don't care. As long as people keep innovating within our space it's an inevitable juggernaut of cultural energy and interesting media. It's irresistible. You can't have games like *BioShock* or *Braid* and not reach out and touch people.

LO: One of the funny things in the media right now is the controversy over *Dragon Age*'s gay sex scenes. I read those terrible gossip blogs and it even showed up there. But BioWare didn't do it because we wanted attention. Ray [Muzukya] and Greg [Zeschuck] talk about creating genuine emotion in









games, and how can you have real characters if you don't allow people to express themselves the way you want.

HW: Someone mentioned earlier that the generational gap is making us look bad, but I think the change is starting to be shown across all industries. If you look at the army, they are making their interfaces for weapons or machines for kids who are 18. It's inevitable that they begin to cater for people who have grown up and understand videogames. I think we're going to see as time goes not a drastic change in the way we are viewed but simply that we are more integrated into daily life.

DB: My perception recently is that the industry has been growing faster, almost at an exponential rate, and it's solving a lot of these problems all by itself. You have things like *Braid* and *Portal*, almost a mainstream acceptance of MMOs, the evolution of FPS titles.

AS: Yeah, *World Of Warcraft* has done a lot for the industry as a whole. But speaking of these clean, polished products. I would never be less interested in working on one of those, but look at what Pixar did for animation. Animation was in a weird Disney musical ghetto for a long time in the US, but all of a sudden there was the Vancouver film school's 3D Animation programme. There's definitely this idea if that there's this big accessible thing it can have a pretty far-reaching effects in a small amount of time.

CM: Well, it's about different audiences. You have your *Bejeweled*, your *Myst*s or even a *Call Of Duty 4* or *Halo* that appeal to a certain audience, and as long as we keep doing that we'll have a good shake. We're getting better at all these new markets like female gamers, but still pumping out those blockbusters.

LO: It's also difficult to gain cultural significance and representation without having cultural diversity. I think that's something that's not talked about a lot in the video game space, as we don't do a great job – certainly at companies I've worked for before – of having a diverse workforce with a diversity of ideas and thoughts and opinions. It's a lot of different ideals that come together to create polished, high-quality experiences in this art form.

RJ: Our new class is about 25 per cent female and we're just thrilled about it. Two of them are twin girl programmers and one of them is an SMU cheerleader!

AS: The one game design course at my university was pretty much an AI course in disguise, and it had one girl.

RJ: Most of them do tend to be in the art and design tracks. But this year almost a quarter of our programming class is female.

DB: We're going to see that continue to change really quickly. It was five years ago that my sister and my girlfriend didn't know a game from a Pop Tart and now they're gaming fanatics.

CM: Even Barbie has an online world now.

HS: My wife and I have played something like 25 hours of *Borderlands* splitscreen. We're the same level right now…

LS: Barely!

LOCATION: AUSTIN

Tracking down the key players in the Texan game-making scene

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TX 78759
(www.arkane-studios.com)

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(www.gl33k.com)

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10814 Jollyville Road
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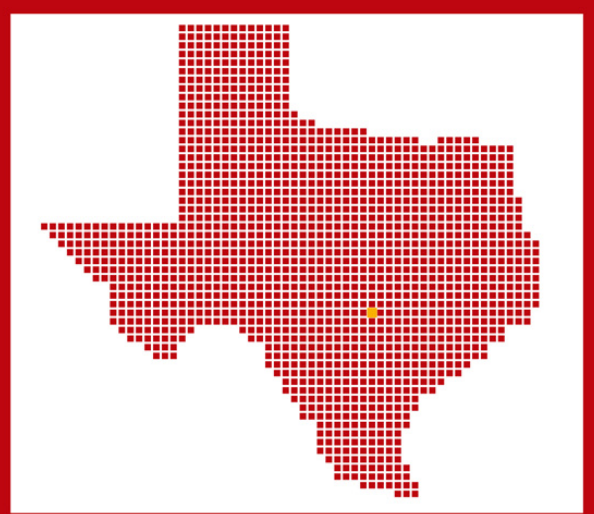
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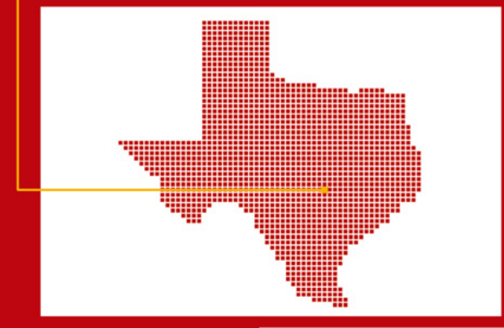
Earth Sciences and Image Analysis Laboratory, NASA Johnson Space Center, image ref: (MRF) ISS007-E-12135 (eol.jsc.nasa.gov)

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TRION WORLD NETWORK

Promising the next generation of MMO technology, Trion World Network is keeping its cards close to its chest

- **NAME:** Trion World Network
- **LOCATION:** Austin, Texas
- **FOUNDED:** 2006
- **EMPLOYEES:** 60
- **URL:** www.trionworld.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Heroes Of Telara*

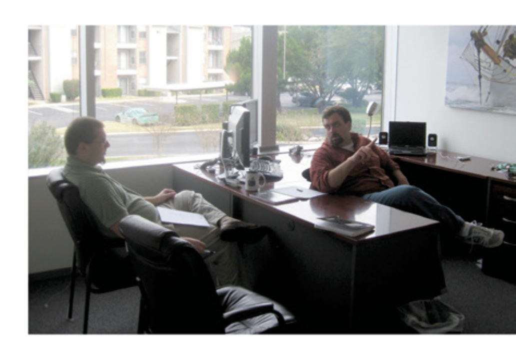


Operating development studios in Redwood City and San Diego in California, Trion World Network's technology studio – the backbone of the company's efforts – is located in Austin, Texas.

Currently in the process of fast expansion – since its founding in 2006, the company has grown to 60 staff in an amply spaced North Austin office – the studio is developing the Trion Platform, intended to be a full-service MMOG development solution. It offers an advanced server architecture, designed to enable 'massive' scalability and dynamic content evolution, and facilitate crossplatform development. It also features an on-hand team ready to offer services such as engineering resources and content testing (to full online production). Then there's the customer service and a publishing infrastructure supporting business models such as digital distribution.

Working on three MMOGs across the group, the first title Trion intends to ship – and the only one announced – is *Heroes Of Telara*, an online fantasy-based MMORPG heavily built around the concept of dynamic content and scheduled events manipulated by the developer's team of community managers, which is also to be located at the Austin location.

While it's obviously a risky proposition to found a large, three-studio developer as a startup rather than growing slowly across a succession of titles, Austin's studio head **Glen Van Datta** is confident in Trion's decision. With the company funded by venture capital, Van Datta places the key to its success in Austin – already known for its place in MMOG history – promising that the decision to be so large, so fast would make sense once it's revealed what the Trion platform offers the MMOG space. "We're not at liberty to say until we've shipped our first product," he says. With titles still in production and under wraps, we talk to Van Datta about the process of founding a (still nascent) studio with such huge importance to a company's success.



Taking advantage of Trion's server-based technology, *Heroes Of Telara* promises "an unprecedented level of rich and dynamic entertainment"







Trion also operates a development studio in Redwood City, California, and a development and thirdparty production studio in San Diego, California





Interview: Glen Van Datta

Austin studio head

We noticed at this location that you have a large area set aside for quality assurance.
Our products use instanced locations, so during testing we may have five people who have to be in the same instance, or ten people next to each other and we want them all in one area. So we're growing fast and placing our teams into what we call 'pods'. We have test teams for three different products, and a test team can move from product to product potentially on a daily basis. That way we can actually have fewer testers – we've driven this model based on our experience from the industry. We have two very experienced leaders in this test group, and by the time we get the first game out we'll be around 100 people or more. The way our platform works, we'll be able to support other developers or publishers that would like to have an MMO presence but don't necessarily have the experience or even the data sites or all the other infrastructure that has to be put together to support an MMO, from development all the way to support.

It's unusual for a company to come straight out of the gate promising three MMOs and the ability to support more.
It is unusual. At this point, the reason that we think we're the next 'next generation' is that most of the time, even in an MMO company, for a new product you build an individual team that includes even infrastructure development, and you start from scratch. In contrast, we want to start a platform that will be a known differentiator in the space. So it is different. You can't capture the entire difference in this interview, but we'll slowly reveal more, and be giving a little more information here and there.

We couldn't help noticing the rather substantial break room.
A relaxed break room is actually something that's really very nice in the games industry. We've got a lot of people that do flextime – working different hours – especially as we have several different physical locations: two in California, one in Austin. There's a two-hour difference and so we have a lot of people starting late or ending late to match up.

But why start off with such a large location overall?
250 square feet per person is the guideline in the United States – in general. So if you think of 25,000 square feet and then you take 250 square feet per person you end up with a 100-person office. Well, we're actually squeezing in quite a bit more than that – we believe we can easily hit 120 to 160 people in this space. You see, making sure the space was contiguous was extremely important to us. We need to have everybody who needs to communicate close to each other, and when they can't be we have made sure teleconferencing is a viable option. Also, between the individual development groups, we didn't want doors as a barrier, so we have a significant number of meeting rooms and training rooms so that we can get together and communicate on a daily basis – very frequently. This is a special thing for us as a platform developer, and as an MMO developer.

For example, in this location we'll soon be ramping up on community managers. That's going to require a significant amount of training, so having these rooms set aside is important to give them that training. The same goes for customer service: we'll have customer service agents based and trained here.



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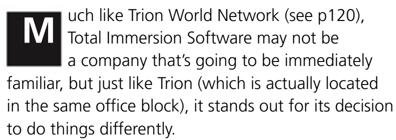




TOTAL IMMERSION SOFTWARE, INC

Serious games developer Total Immersion takes its workers' quality of life as seriously as its software

- **NAME:** Total Immersion Software, Inc
- **LOCATION:** Austin, Texas; Alameda, California; Arlington, Virginia
- **FOUNDED:** 2003
- **EMPLOYEES:** 52 (at Austin)
- **URL:** www.totimm.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** RealWorld



Much like Trion World Network (see p120), Total Immersion Software may not be a company that's going to be immediately familiar, but just like Trion (which is actually located in the same office block), it stands out for its decision to do things differently.

A serious games company staffed almost entirely by game industry veterans (titles produced by on-site staff include everything from *Magic: The Gathering* to *Spore*), Total Immersion brings production expertise to the serious game space by employing a purpose-designed office.

The set-up was introduced by Origin veteran **Frank Roan**, general manager of the Austin, Texas studio (Total Immersion also has offices in California and Virginia), who put great thought into every part of the development experience.

Attention to the detail of workplace conditions is key to Roan. From the choice of office chair ("I wanted the best chair, ergonomically, we could get") to the use of electronic desks that enable staff to choose the exact height they work at, precision is paramount – just as it is to the United States military, a key contractor for Total Immersion.

Total Immersion's flagship product is RealWorld, a PC-based platform that allows non-programmers to rapidly build 3D, geo-specific simulations, to test and train against potential scenarios a military might face.

"Many of our simulations don't train soldiers how to use a weapon," explains Roan. "They might train for a scenario where they would need to understand the timing it takes to walk from this block to that block, or how tall the trees are; what to do if the door that needs to be breached is metal or wood, and so on.

"At the same time, you know, they are human, and they get turned on by a great user interface or impressive high-end graphics. So it's kind of interesting to note that while true functionality is a primary goal, the quality of the technology and a quality engine are still really important too. That part is really where our game expertise becomes a huge boon."











RealWorld is a mission rehearsal, training and game development platform enabling experts to create hi-fidelity virtual environments





The Austin studio of Total Immersion Software was founded in 2007 on the strength of a demo produced for DARPA, the clandestine research agency for the Department of Defense





Interview: Frank Roan

General manager, Austin studio

What does the serious games space offer developers?
Almost all of the developers here are from the games industry. And they're still doing game technology, but the serious games space can offer something different from the straight games industry – great working conditions and long-term potential. You aren't working 100 hours a week for two years on a product that could be canned at any point – one day your entire studio could shut down. If you're older, or have a family, but still love doing the technology, love the visual nature of games but just don't like the insecurity, then the serious games space has a lot to offer.

Is Total Immersion purely a developer of serious games?
For the most part, it's the same technology base, and we own our core technology. If we want to go back into gaming, we can, but in the position we're in now, we're able to service a lot more than just the entertainment space. It's been really enlightening and sort of a relief that the risk has gone down so far for us. A lot of games companies have gone out of business here in Austin – Midway shut down, NCSoft heavily downsized – but we've been hiring, doubling in size across one year. We would like to get back into entertainment games at some point when the time is right, when we can manage that risk with military contracts or other serious game contracts in the commercial space. But the serious games space is the emerging market – game companies, to be competitive, are going to need to manage their risk.

If you look at the games industry, you're set up to fail. I've run game studios. Maybe you knock it out of the park the first time. Maybe you knock it out of the park the second time. But at some point in this process, you're going to have a failure. It's amazing. I've been involved in it. I was part of 3DO, GT Interactive, Origin. Origin was the place to be in the games industry. We were doing *Wing Commander*, *Ultima*, we had Warren Spector, Richard Garriott, Chris Roberts. I started there in '93. In 2004, it was gone.

Why is the serious games space so much less risky?
You could do the best game in the world and then *Doom 4* could ship that same week and just kill your sales. And you don't know that three years prior, when you start the project. In our world, you get a contract, you deliver, and as long as you meet the needs of the contract and people are happy to use it, then you're successful.

If we want to do a game, we can turn around and do a game. But if that game fails or the games industry blows up, we can still support ourselves.

But aren't serious games quite different from commercial games?
You would be surprised. There are some fidelity differences, like the weapons – you don't want Hollywood-style explosions. You want the weapons to act realistically: an M60 should act like an M60, but in games we'll make the explosion ten times bigger a lot of the time, or change the sounds of the rifles to be more bombastic. But we have to make it just right for the military – we have to be more exact. But for 99 per cent of it, it's the same thing we'd do for the games industry.

Total Immersion Software, Inc.™

Founded in 2003, Total Immersion Software, Inc. is the creator of RealWorld®, a revolutionary PC-based platform that enables non-programmers to rapidly build 2D/3D, geo-specific simulations. Originally a Department of Defense project, our tools and technology have grown to become widely used and extremely valuable for time-critical applications where lives are on the line: war-fighters, first responders, and security forces.

Our development studios capture the best aspects of game development without the constant crushing deadlines found in traditional gaming companies. We are well funded, offer Fortune-500 caliber benefits, and we strongly believe in creative, innovative, and empowered work environments.



WE ARE HIRING!

Our philosophy is simple: It takes top talent to produce top software. We recruit and hire the best and we invest in our talent in order to guarantee success.



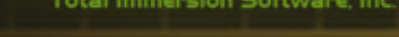
Game Programmers
Graphics Programmers
Lead Programmers
Networking/Multiplayer Programmer



Development studios in Austin, TX * Alameda, CA







www.totimm.com

Please send resumes to Jobs@totimm.com



SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

- **NAME:** Sony Online Entertainment Austin
- **LOCATION:** Austin, Texas
- **FOUNDED:** 2000
- **EMPLOYEES:** 150
- **URL:** www.station.sony.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Star Wars Galaxies*

SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT AUSTIN

The MMOG developer is looking forward to a persistent universe of game developers in Texas







SOEA's *DC Universe Online* is set to enter the MMOG war in early 2010. Pitting your own personal hero or villain against a selection of classic comic-book characters, it's put in a great showing every time it's been demonstrated





Star Wars Galaxies proved that SOEA could faithfully recreate iconic imagery within the realms of a massively multiplayer world

Interview: Oge Young

Producer

Sony Online Entertainment's Austin studio is best known for developing *Star Wars Galaxies*, and is currently hard at work on its next licensed MMO property, *DC Universe Online*, but the company is an active member of the Austin community and deeply considerate of the place and future of game development as an industry in Texas. We talked to one of the company's leading producers, **Oge Young**, about that future.

How supportive has the government been to the local industry?
The governor has actually been very supportive, and I would say that having motion picture history in Texas has shown that a creative industry can bring revenue to the state. I'm actually the game industry representative to the Texas Motion Picture Alliance, which is the lobbying organisation that helps get the tax credits from the state, and they were very inviting to the videogame industry to join forces. I think it's clear to the state what revenues are possible here by having a healthy games industry.

So it's a good place to do business?
Texas is a good place to be in the industry. You have a good community, especially in Austin – no offence to Dallas – that supports the creative side, while the state government supports the business side of making games. Of course, if you only consider the state from the view of what the government offers, there's a lot more that can be done for the games industry here. But from a more holistic point of view – just as a place to live and do business – it's doing a lot for us already. Compared to other videogame hubs in North America, it's relatively inexpensive to get commercial real estate here and you can get away with paying lower salaries too, due to there being a much higher standard of living at a lower cost. People will come here to work for less because they know they'll get more value from their wage.

What could make the area more attractive?
What the state of Texas can do for us is provide us with a skilled workforce via improving education – the University of Texas needs to step up and improve its programmes and really get involved in the industry, motivating our workforce to stay in the state, as there's a lot of pride in people who graduate here.

There has been a lot done in the past couple of years here in terms of incentives for videogame companies, but there's a lot more to be done. Louisiana – right next door to us – just passed a bill that provides far more than what the state of Texas currently provides. I worked at EA in Orlando previously and they had a tremendous deal with the state in terms of the real estate the company was able to buy. Like developers, the local government needs to stay competitive, too.



Arkane Studios is hiring

in Lyon, France
and Austin, Texas

Our games include Arx Fatalis®, Dark Messiah of Might & Magic®(singleplayer), we also contributed to Call of Duty: World at War® (multiplayer maps) and Bioshock2® (singleplayer).

If you have a passion for playing and making first person immersive games and want to share this passion with highly skilled and motivated staff in a multicultural, creative and friendly atmosphere, then contact us.

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ARKANE STUDIOS

For Arkane, game development isn't a job but a religion – whether you're based in Lyon or Austin

ARKANE STUDIOS

NAME: Arkane Studios
LOCATION: Austin; Lyon, France;
FOUNDED: 1999
EMPLOYEES: 9 (Austin); 42 (Lyon, France)
URL: www.arkane-studios.com
SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY: *Dark Messiah*, *Arx Fatalis*

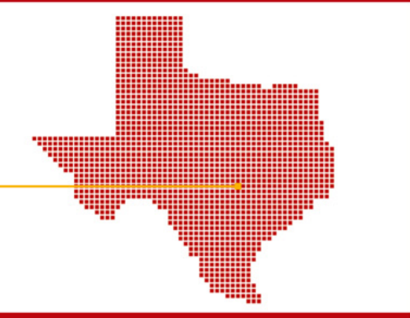












Interview: Raphael Colantonio and Harvey Smith

CEO and game director

Co-game director



Arkane Studios' *Dark Messiah* and *Arx Fatalis* impressed enough to win it a collaborative role on 2K's eagerly awaited *BioShock* sequel

Arkane has existed for ten years in France, and founded an Austin studio in 2005 to make use of the local talent. As a result, the company uses a unique management style that we discuss with CEO and game director **Raphael Colantonio** and co-game director **Harvey Smith**.

Does the studio here work completely in tandem with the one in Lyon?

Harvey Smith: Yes. It's very strange. It's the most distributed place I've ever worked. We literally have video conferencing carts. We leave them by people's desks, on all day, and so a level designer could be working with a level architect and his face is right there. They're looking at each other and can say: "What do you think about putting a door here? We need a door here." They can go back and forth. Arkane uses video conferencing differently than people conceive of. Most people think it's a meeting tool. And it's fine for that. But the real value, if you've got guys working at remote sites, is in day-to-day camaraderie and instant communication. A little thing occurs to you as you're working; the guy's right there – you ask him about it…

Raphael Colantonio: Yeah. And it's made some deals possible, such as working with 2K on *BioShock 2*. We worked with the dev team using video conferencing that way, but initially, when we talk about it to a publisher, they're always like: "Oh, I don't know about that." And then they try it. They buy the equipment and they love it. That has happened three times so far. Three times we actually kind of forced – not forced, convinced – publishers, and once they get it? "Wow. That stuff's cool."

So, do you consider the Lyon and Austin offices to be distinct teams?

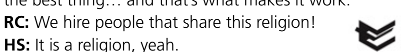
HS: It's a little blended and a little discrete. Here we have me and Raph co-directing the game. There, we have our producer, who's kind of always been Raph's right-hand man on projects anyway. There are more guys there, something like 45, but here we have gameplay programmers and there they have the tech programmers. The only thing we really don't have here is art or sound.

RC: Most of the design is happening here, but we do have a couple of programmers there that are going to be rolled in.

HS: I think one of the things that makes it work is also one of the best things about Arkane. Everyone here is aligned, both in taste and officially – given the identity of the company – around the specific game values that we have for the current project we're working on – to be atmospheric, engaging, immersive and very much a simulation. There are differences in the way we implement things like that compared to other places. Raph and I have been in games for about 16 years and *Ultima Underworld* is our favourite game, with *Thief*, *System Shock*, *Deus Ex* and other games forming our values. The company is built around that. That's the best thing… and that's what makes it work.

RC: We hire people that share this religion!

HS: It is a religion, yeah.



LOCATION: DALLAS

Tracking down the key players in the Texan game-making scene

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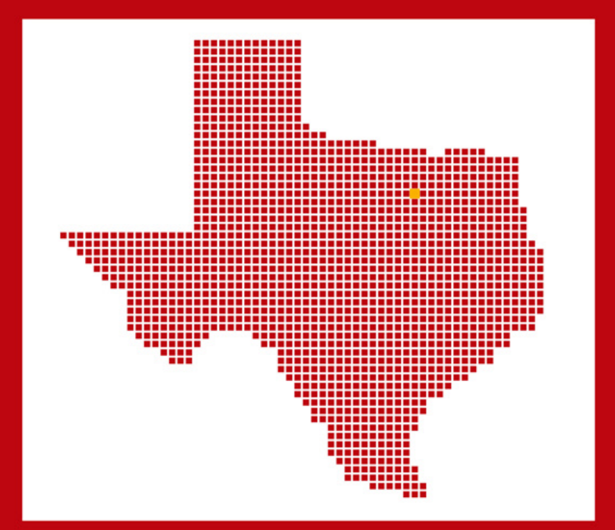
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TX 76051
(spidermonk.com)

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Lewisville
TX 75067-3894
(www.terminalreality.com)

7



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ID SOFTWARE

One of Texas's old guard, id Software is making a fresh start since partnering with Zenimax

- **NAME:** id Software
- **LOCATION:** Mesquite
- **FOUNDED:** 1991
- **EMPLOYEES:** 115
- **URL:** www.idsoftware.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Commander Keen, Wolfenstein 3D, Doom, Quake*





Regular readers will recall our cover story on *Rage* from last year, which detailed how id's John Carmack is implementing new tech to give life to a game which fuses firstperson shooting with offroad racing action



Interview: Todd Hollenshead

CEO

It was one of the most surprising stories of 2009 – id Software, a stalwart independent since 1991, purchased by Zenimax, Bethesda Softworks' parent company. But unlike many, who see it as the end of a chapter for Texas game development, id Software CEO **Todd Hollenshead** argues convincingly that it's a new beginning for the company – one sorely needed in today's console-dominated marketplace.

How are things going at id?
Very good. We went through the merger with Zenimax in June and I think things are pretty well integrated now, and of course we have a number of projects that we're working on. It seems like we always have a number of things going on here, everything from the mobile phone business and *Quake Live* to our two big projects – *Rage* and *Doom* – that are under development.

How has the merger panned out?
It's actually worked out really well. They value development for its own sake, rather than just trying to put something in a box and relying on marketing for sales. They believe in the quality of the product you put in and the value of the entertainment the consumer gets out as what ultimately drives the business. Even more so now than in the past, having a high-quality publishing partner is critical, because the business is so much about either having a hit or being totally irrelevant. There really isn't a lot of room in the middle.

Of course, everyone looks at it as, "Well, id was purchased by Zenimax!" but I think it's just as true that we acquired an internal publishing capacity. That's really what the relationship is. As much as we have valued our publishing relationships with other thirdparty publishers in the past, there is a difference, because we were separate companies. Although we were trying to work together, ultimately there is an idea that we have divergent goals.

Did you feel recent id games had performed in the 'middle'? Was that a reason to partner up?
I wouldn't say that I thought it was a key motivator, but certainly in the past we focused almost exclusively on PC internally. We worked with other developers to do the console versions of the games, but it was PC first and foremost. We really didn't have any aspirations about a simultaneous release across the platforms, and that's required us to change our internal development strategy. Luckily, we've got a resource like John Carmack who can come up with the technology to allow us to support PC, 360 and PS3. But from a publishing standpoint – when each time you have to go into certification and deal with the technical requirements of 'their D button does this and start button has to do that' and all those sorts of things – this isn't something that we've dealt with internally on a project of our own, ever. It's wonderful that as a combined entity we have a QA resource and publishing resource from which we can borrow experience, especially from [*Fallout 3* designer] Todd Howard's team.





TIMEGATE STUDIOS

Based in Sugar Land, how could life for TimeGate be anything other than sweet?

- **NAME:** TimeGate Studios
- **LOCATION:** Sugar Land
- **FOUNDED:** 1998
- **EMPLOYEES:** 70
- **URL:** www.timegate.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns, Axis & Allies, FEAR: Extraction Point, FEAR: Perseus Mandate, Section 8*







Founded by cousins Adel and Alan Chaveleh, TimeGate is now one of Texas's most successful developers, employing 70 staff. Despite Houston's low profile within the state's game industry, the company attracts plenty of talent from outside of the region



Interview: Adel Chaveleh

President

An independent developer of FPS, MMO and RTS games across multiple platforms, TimeGate Studios is most recently known for developing the heavily multiplayer-orientated FPS *Section 8*. Based in Sugar Land, the company "seeks to develop games that not only inspire players, but also challenge genre boundaries that most people simply take for granted", according to president **Adel Chaveleh**. It's a modus operandi that's served the company well across its 11-year history.

Houston is a larger city than both Austin and Dallas, but when it comes to games it has a lower profile – why is that?
Austin and Dallas are perhaps better known hubs in the game industry because of a larger developer and publisher presence. For every one title you see out of a Houston studio, you're probably seeing ten to 20 over there. The funny thing is that we're only a three-hour drive from our cousins in both cities, and Texas as a whole is an awesome place to live and work in.

What is the local talent pool like?
You'd be amazed at how many creative individuals a city like Houston can produce. There is a large assortment of developers here at TimeGate across all disciplines who were born and raised in the area.

Do you recruit from elsewhere?
Extensively. Beyond our home-grown talent, many of our seasoned developers come from the East and West Coast, as well as Canada and abroad. Compared to those areas, Texas is a big win in terms of the cost of living. Sugar Land has been one of the highest-rated communities across the US for years, and Houston has all the amenities and attractions of any other major city. Once we start talking about the studio's original IPs and unique approach to development, it can be hard to look away from such an enticing package.

You used to develop RTS titles – what was the impetus behind the shift to the FPS genre?
The passion of the studio had shifted, and we needed to follow the hearts of our developers. We lived and breathed FPS games during lunch and after work, and everyone rallied around an idea that eventually evolved into *Section 8*. To some, the prospect of a new genre, new platforms, and a new IP might be daunting, but it's that same passion for an innovative title that made us form TimeGate and create *Kohan* to begin with. It's also that same passion that's now made us take the leap into MMOs, and will likely bring us back to RTS games when we feel that the time is right.

TimeGate's futuristic multiplayer military firstperson shooter *Section 8* was launched on PC and Xbox 360 in September 2009

LOCATION: HOUSTON

Tracking down the key players in the Texan game-making scene

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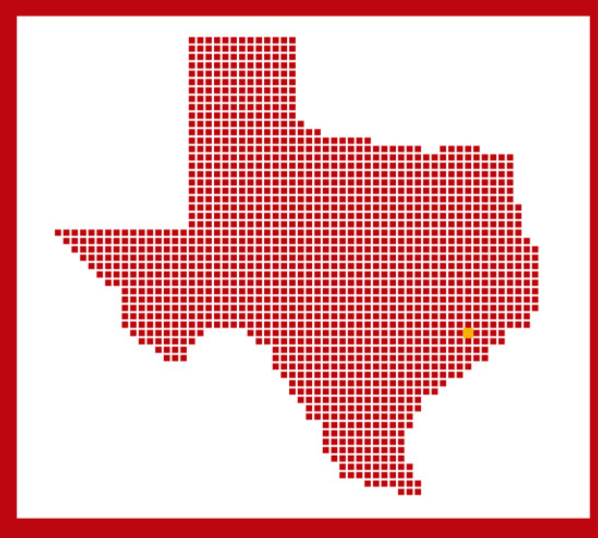
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TIMEGATE STUDIOS

14140 Southwest Fwy
Sugar Land
TX 77478-3759
(www.timegatestudios.com)

3





3

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THE GUILDHALL AT SMU

Closer to apprentices than students, followers of this programme are clay waiting to be fired

- **NAME:** The Guildhall at SMU
- **LOCATION:** Plano
- **FOUNDED:** 2003
- **EMPLOYEES:** 9 full-time staff, 13 full-time faculty, 5 adjunct professors
- **URL:** guildhall.smu.edu
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Nightmare*, *Dissonance*, *Toybox Heroes*, *Weekday Warrior*, *Shanty Town*, *The Color Of Doom*

Located alongside the Hart eCentre at Southern Methodist University's Plano campus, The Guildhall at SMU is a graduate degree programme that accepts a class of roughly 45 students per admission (twice a year), split evenly between art, design and programming specialisations.

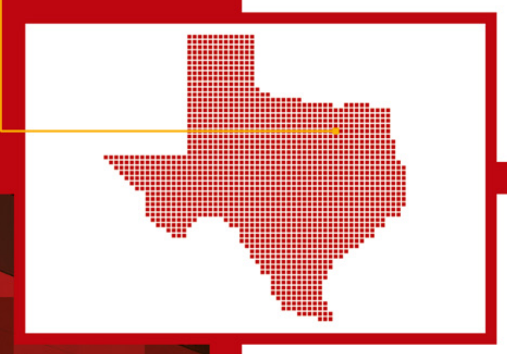
Formed in 2003 in response to local game developers requesting a worthy game development programme – and made possible by the Hart eCentre's unique position outside of the University 'school system' – The Guildhall at SMU uses industry veteran faculty (including well-known names such as id software/Ensemble Studio's Sandy Petersen). Its student teams have produced titles such as *Weekday Warrior*, an Independent Games Festival 2007 Mod Competition winner.

However, the course's intensity will come as a shock to many who might expect more of a 'traditional' university experience. "You're late for class, you flunk. You miss a class, you flunk," explains **Ron Jenkins**, The Guildhall at SMU's deputy director of development and external affairs. "These are the rules. It's not about you getting an A, it's about us all getting an A." Even the course's website – otherwise intending to attract students – warns that a "normal school day" is "about 12-15 hours" and that "during project times, it's not unheard of for students to do over 20 extra hours per week."

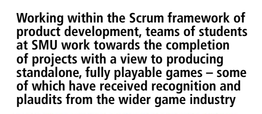
But, of course, the benefit lies in SMU's access to industry faculty and the realism of the heavily team-led education, with teams ramping quickly up to groups of 15 to 20 people.

"The name, The Guildhall at SMU, is intentional," argues **Peter Raad**, executive director and founder. "It comes from about 800-900AD in Europe, when the guilds and the universitas models were equally popular. Then the monks decided the university model was scalable and distributable, and the other model was not. That's why the university model became ubiquitous and the guild model was relegated to the crafts. But it's essential for us because you need to be an apprentice. It's not enough to just read the books; you also have to practise."

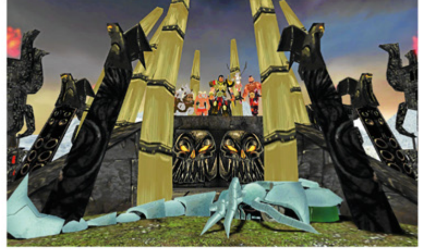








Working within the Scrum framework of product development, teams of students at SMU work towards the completion of projects with a view to producing standalone, fully playable games – some of which have received recognition and plaudits from the wider game industry



















The emphasis here is squarely on teamwork – along with dedication to the craft. An extensive suite of facilities helps to lubricate the process

Interview: Peter Raad

Executive director

It's clear that the course is very demanding. Is that reconcilable with the strive for a better work-life balance in the industry?
We certainly are guilty here at SMU of making our students work extremely hard. SMU is not a school you would arrive at to explore whether, some day, you might want to become a videogame developer. This is [like] medical school. You're here because you've made a decision that you want to be a game developer.

And so, yes, the hours are very long. Instead of one credit being 50 minutes, it's three hours a week. The students here carry a tremendous burden on their shoulders. They're here from nine o' clock in the morning until one o' clock in the morning. Security has to come and shut the doors at one o' clock because they're always working on something.

We notice that you use the Scrum development methodology in teaching at SMU.
Scrum is essential, I think, to the future of the games industry and in particular to the education of our students here, because it has a very particular aspect to it that I think is fundamental – choice. Students choose what to take off the tree and work on, so to speak. They make a personal commitment. In the academic environment, you can't fire your teammates. You can't give them a raise. You're cajoling, you're building consensus all the time. You can't just go to somebody and say, "I can't believe you haven't turned this asset in. I've been waiting for it for three days." But when that person committed to actually producing it in the allotted time, you don't have to do that any more, because they're the ones who are driving.

You accept students in groups called 'cohorts'. How does that differ from a normal course?
The cohort is a group of students that is admitted into SMU together – one in fall and one in spring. The reason they're a cohort is because they march through the program in lockstep. It's unlike other programmes where you could take courses in different sequences and you can set out a term or a year. If you fall off the train for any reason – you make a bad grade, you slip and fall and break your leg and have to be off for two months or something – then you can't be in that cohort any more. You have to jump off the train, walk back to the station and hope that the next cohort picks you up.

The reason for this is that when we admit students into art, design and programming, we admit a balance of artists and designers and programmers from day one. If I don't have any artists, then I'm sure going to have a hard time putting together a team.

How important is it that your students learn to work in teams?
It's huge. Alone, it's not going to get you hired. People hire you because of your expertise. It's one of those necessary but not sufficient conditions. I think it's essential because if I'm a great flautist or a great pianist and I can be a soloist, that's wonderful. But if I want to be part of an orchestra I have to learn to listen and get the most not only out of myself but out of other people. If I'm part of a soccer team and I never pass the ball, I'm not going to be on that team for long! This is why we use teams at SMU: for the students to learn how to work with people across disciplines.



TEXAS INDEPENDENCE

From Austin to Dallas, the Lone Star spirit is helping to keep indie production thriving

It's a cliché, yes, but Texas is large. So large, in fact, that the independent scene here is spread a little thinner than in other places. Given that in other Region Specifics we've tended to cover communities across a city or even within a building, it would be easy to assume that Texan gaming independence was restricted to the famously 'weird' Austin, but with four of the indies here based in Dallas it's clear there's more to the story than that.

But just because the talent is spread across a wider area doesn't mean it's any less trailblazing. From experiments on the new frontier of game contracting, with companies such as game audio service provider GL33k, or attempts to maintain a sustainable business on iPhone through Newtoy's *...With Friends* or Semi Secret's *Canabalt*, Texas is on the frontier of independent game development, with a vibrant scene, friendly companies, and a lot to be said.

Studio profile



SEMI SECRET SOFTWARE

Not afraid of challenging the app aristrocracy, meet the team that's putting Flash back on the gaming map

Semi Secret Software – responsible for the fearsomely addictive *Canabalt* – is the best-kept secret on the Austin indie scene. Small and fiercely independent, its team of loosely affiliated developers – including **Adam Saltsman** and musician Danny Baranowsky – have previously worked on indie darling Flash projects such as *Gravity Hook* and *Fathom*, before coalescing into a fully fledged iPhone/iPod Touch developer with *Wurdle*, an Eric Johnson design and concept.



Semi Secret's team – Adam Saltsman, Danny Baranowsky, Bekah and Eric Johnson – have no offices, instead working from home

- **NAME:** Semi Secret Software
- **LOCATION:** Austin
- **FOUNDED:** 2008
- **EMPLOYEES:** 4
- **URL:** semisecretsoftware.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Wurdle*, *Canabalt*

Interview: Adam Saltsman

Director



Why do you think *Canabalt* got such a negative response when you launched it at $2.99?

I think a decent amount of it is that it's a Flash game, and Flash games still have negative connotations because they're suppose to be crappy and free, and the idea that you could possibly charge more than a dollar is just insane. The responses were funny. The attitude was very much, How dare you charge three dollars? I don't even want to pay a dollar.' It was so ludicrous, some saying, 'I'll pay $1.99 but never pay $2.99!' It's like, all right, cool.

What is the cost justification of a $2.99 game on iPhone/iPod Touch?

Pricing at 99 cents is really, really important if you want to make it into the top ten. If you make it into the top ten, you can sell 500,000 to 600,000 copies of your game if you get a good run. And at that point, you've made more than enough money to fund your next project. However, getting into the top ten means competing with every other app on the App Store, most of which are also priced at 99 cents.

Our strategy was definitely very different – to have a good-selling iPhone game, not a hit iPhone game. We assumed correctly that you can do that and not price it at 99 cents. It becomes vastly more important to not be 99 cents when you come out of that top ten. If you sell your game at 99 cents and you do good numbers – not top ten numbers, but say 50,000 copies – then Apple takes its 30 per cent and you end up with $35,000. We don't have office space and have a nice tiny team, but that would last us maybe a month. That approach to the iPhone is really risky. This tendency for the market to convince independent developers that that's what they have to do is really bad.

In association with SMU | GUILDHALL Game Development Education guildhall.smu.edu



NEWTOY

Based in a town on the outskirts of Dallas, Newtoy invites iPhone users to make friends across the world

- **NAME:** Newtoy
- **LOCATION:** McKinney
- **FOUNDED:** 2008
- **EMPLOYEES:** 7
- **URL:** www.newtoyinc.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Words With Friends*, *Chess With Friends*

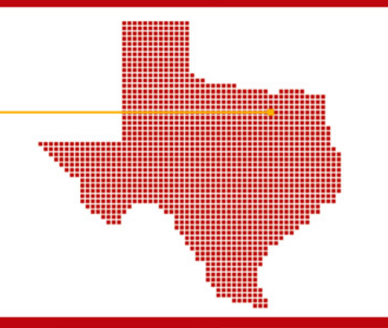








Paul and David Bettner are the duo who brought the world the *Age Of Empires* series. They're joined by a crew of Ensemble Studios veterans who share a goal of challenging the way iPhone gaming is approached



Interview: Paul Bettner

Studio director

Founded in 2008 by the sibling team of David and **Paul Bettner** (the former taking part in the discussion on p110), Newtoy offers lean, streamlined asynchronised board game titles for iPhone and iPod Touch in the …*With Friends* series. Brand leaders *Chess With Friends* and *Words With Friends* are currently big App Store hits and the brothers have another title in development.

Until now, the …*With Friends* titles hadn't hit the top 50 on the App Store, yet you say they've still been very successful.

It's been a fun ride, moving up from our first couple of thousand users to the hundreds of thousands that we have playing the game every day now. I'm glad we didn't just jump right into number one in the first day, because we would have been in trouble making sure that everything stays running. We have over 450,000 daily active users across all our titles now, which I think makes our games some of the most played titles on the iPhone. On average, our users spend an hour and a half each day playing our games – they launch them about eight times and play about ten minutes each time. So they're extremely engaged in it. If you look at the graph of typical iPhone app usage over time, the majority of people who download an app aren't using it any more by the second day. With our games, the vast majority of people who download them are still playing weeks and even months later! This gives our games an amazingly active community of players.

As veterans of Ensemble Studios, which is known for RTS titles, why create the …*With Friends* brand for iPhone/iPod Touch?

Dave [Bettner] and I always intended to start a studio together, and the products came from a desire to figure out what it was that Dave and I could build ourselves with no resources at all, and get to market as quickly as possible. [We wanted to] keep it really limited in scope so it could be really high quality and something we would be proud of.

My inspiration for this was Nintendo, because their games go so hand in hand with their hardware that you just couldn't have one without the other. There would be no *Nintendogs* without the DS because the touchscreen was so critical to the experience, and the DS wouldn't have succeeded if it wasn't for a game like *Nintendogs*.

So we looked at the iPhone and asked what can the iPhone do that no other game platform can do. We got really excited about this idea that it's always connected and it's always with you. You can take it out of your pocket and instantly be connected to the gaming world without having to do anything. We took that and asked, 'What can we do?' That's why *Chess With Friends* was our first product. There's never been a platform that's allowed you to play turn-based multiplayer games from anywhere. We thought, 'If I'm waiting for a meeting and I pull my phone out of my pocket for just a minute or two, what's the kind of game experience I would want to have, what would be fun?'

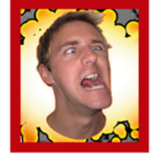


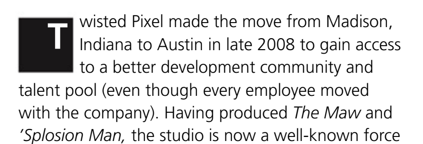
A leading title in Newtoy's …*With Friends* series, *Words With Friends* is loosely based on a Scrabble-type board game. Newtoy's asynchronous titles enable users to connect across the world at a time that's convenient to everyone



TWISTED PIXEL GAMES

Looking at things from a different angle, the Twisted Pixel team is happy in its new home of Austin





Twisted Pixel made the move from Madison, Indiana to Austin in late 2008 to gain access to a better development community and talent pool (even though every employee moved with the company). Having produced *The Maw* and *'Splosion Man,* the studio is now a well-known force in the Xbox Live Arcade downloadable space.



Frank and his ravenous companion The Maw proved a sizeable hit for Twisted Pixel when it released *The Maw* on Xbox Live Arcade

Interview: Michael Wilford

CEO

With two games under your belt, you're already known for creating amusing titles. Was that planned?
It's not exactly a strategy. We're not engineering our games to have humour in them – it's just kind of on the fly. Someone has an idea for something cool to throw in there and if Josh [Bear, creative officer] is like, "Yeah, go for it," we'll see if it's funny. The Donuts Song in *'Splosion Man* is one example. The guy doing audio for us, Matt Chaney [from Gl33k], one day said to us: "Hey, I think it would be funny if whenever you grab one of the fat scientists you just hear this crazy song." And we were like: "That sounds kind of weird, but go for it." It was totally awesome and we kept it in.

So you rely on doing what feels 'right' during development?
I'd say that's true. Maybe that's stupid, but this company isn't some grand scheme to make a gazillion dollars. Before this we all had decent jobs. We're doing this because we wanted to make the games we wanted, and to work with our best friends. This is just about having a good time.

What's next?
We're ramping up on our second team. We've always had a second team, but it's just been smaller and doing contract work to balance the risk of the company. Now we're thinking we can grow that a little bit and maybe do another downloadable project. As far as retail, I think we have ideas that are larger in scope than would fit in a downloadable title right now, but I think we're pretty happy in the downloadable space – the scopes of games are growing tremendously with the likes of *Shadow Complex*, and *Comic Jumper* is going to take it up another notch.

- **NAME:** Twisted Pixel Games
- **LOCATION:** Austin
- **FOUNDED:** 2006
- **EMPLOYEES:** 13
- **URL:** twistedpixelgames.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *The Maw*, *'Splosion Man*

Studio profile



ESCALATION STUDIOS

From Samba De Amigo to Doom Resurrection, this Dallas-based indie is hard to pin down



Formed by developers well known in the Dallas scene, with veterans from id Software, Gearbox and Ritual Entertainment, Escalation Studios is the latest developer in a long line sired from 3D Realms, one of the originators of the Dallas gaming community. But unlike the dearly departed, Escalation Studios has a core philosophy intended to keep it lean, mean and alive for a long time.



Escalation Studios' futuristic-looking home has seen the indie developer working on both ports and original titles

Interview: Tom Mustaine

Founder

What's the philosophy behind Escalation Studios?
The thing about game companies is that in the past, developers sat down and said, "Let's start a game company. What are we going to do? I don't know. How are we going to make money? I don't know. We'll get a publisher/we'll spend some of our own money/we'll work out of our garage."

We began with a different intent – to start a grown-up game developer with corporate goals: profitability, to make solid games, to not to put our developers through hell, and to make sure we have a competitive edge – for example, we built *Samba De Amigo*, and we were the first guys to do e-commerce downloads on the Wii.

Since then, you've turned to iPhone/iPod Touch development.
We're all veterans and we've done this a lot – platforms are platforms and games are games. We tend to know what to do to make ourselves stand out on each of the platforms that we tackle, and we're continuing to do stuff on Wii, plus we've got Xbox 360, PS3 and even Facebook initiatives going on internally.

I think one of big targets nowadays is to avoid becoming pigeonholed. If you look at id, for example, [people say] "Oh, they're a shooter company." Well, what if they wanted to build an RTS one of these days? They would have a hard time doing that unless they funded it themselves. So we've built everything from the casual, family games like *Samba De Amigo* and *Dr Awesome* all the way to hardcore shooters like *Doom Resurrection*. Needless to say, it's a pretty interesting business that we're trying to employ. A lot of our choices look haphazard externally but there's a long-term strategy there.

- **NAME:** Escalation Studios
- **LOCATION:** Dallas
- **FOUNDED:** 2006
- **EMPLOYEES:** 20
- **URL:** escalationstudios.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Samba De Amigo*, *Dr Awesome*, *Doom Resurrection*

In association with SMU GUILDHALL GAME DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION guildhall.smu.edu

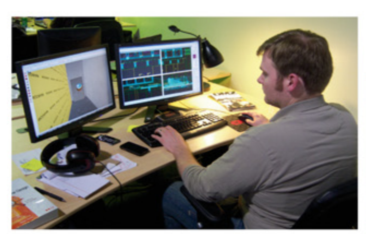




CONTROLLED CHAOS MEDIA

Though it started small, Controlled Chaos Media is now facing the chaos of growing exponentially

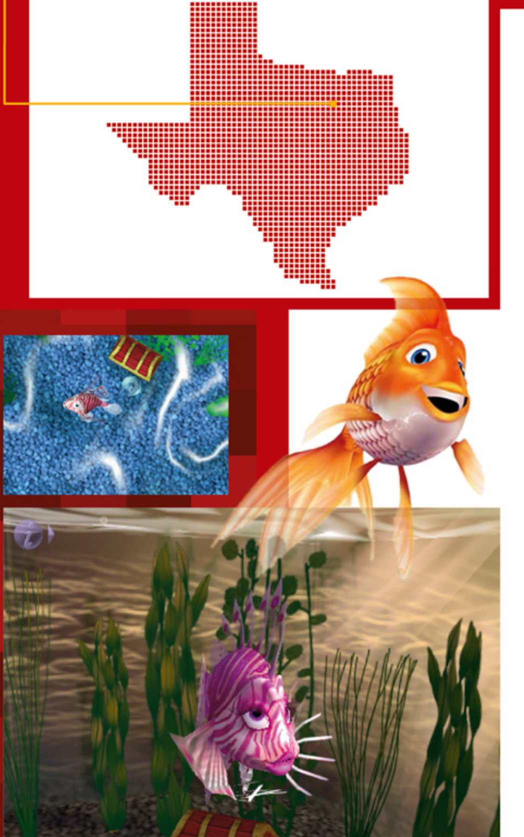
- **NAME:** Controlled Chaos Media
- **LOCATION:** Dallas
- **FOUNDED:** 2009
- **EMPLOYEES:** 12
- **URL:** www.cchaosmedia.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Pocket Fish*





In a time of economic uncertainty, Controlled Chaos Media is bucking the trend with its growth. But the team isn't taking it for granted





Interview: Hunter Woodlee

Studio director

One of the newest companies in this article, only incorporated at the beginning of 2009, Controlled Chaos was a surprisingly rapid success story, with its first release – iPhone/iPod Touch app *Pocket Fish* – quickly entering Apple's top 50 apps. However, founder **Hunter Woodlee** isn't one to rest on his laurels, and is looking to ramp up the company into a full-scale console game developer.

How strong is the pool of talent in Dallas?

Oh, sure, Dallas has a lot of talent. There are a lot of good places for young talent – most of the colleges have programmes here. Michael, our lead artist; David, our lead designer; and one of our interns, Mark, came from The Guildhall at SMU. Chris came from the University of Texas at Dallas. There are kids we've seen even from community colleges who have great skills. There's always a pool of talent and people that are hungry for work.

So, recruiting isn't a problem?

You know what? It's going to be, for people that are higher up. The biggest hurdle we're going to run into is just finding good people who are a good fit. It always takes time to find the higher-up people because they are established and if they're good they usually have a job. And we are ramping up, growing exponentially fast. Right now, we're running very small and really efficient, which allows us to stretch our money as long as we can. But it's not where we're going. We're going to require a larger team and need good people. People who are willing to relocate to the Dallas area or who are already located here. We are looking for good people who are versatile – who can work well within a small team or a large team.

What have you been doing to prepare the company for this expansion?

We've had to construct from the ground up, so in my opinion the smartest thing to do was to get the best people I know in management. The latest shake-up in our economy has shown us is that if a company is not run efficiently then it can eat you alive. Keeping overhead low will keep you afloat. The best thing that we've done is to stay efficient: we started out in my apartment, then moved into a larger open space and we've been popping at the seams lately with contractors, but it's much better to be popping at the seams than to have far too much space, and too much overhead.

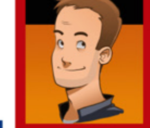
How many contractors do you use?

We've got anywhere from six to eight contractors at any given time. Right now, we're working on a prototype to go to publishers with for a game that we've been working on. Most of the work is done – now it's coming down to polish, tweaking, and so, while we were ramping up getting that done, we had a lot of contractors coming in. We had a lot of part-time contractors especially and so now that things are slowing down – it's just a matter of us fixing bugs, and going through and making sure the whole experience is perfect.



SPIDERMONK ENTERTAINMENT

From mobile games to software sold at retail, it's execution that defines this independent developer



Interview: Scott March
Founder

Spidermonk Entertainment's founder, **Scott March**, was at one point a faculty member of The Guildhall at Southern Methodist University, so he knows a lot about small team development – choosing to keep Spidermonk Entertainment small and rely on contractors as part of the bigger picture. Though he admits he's hired a few staff from SMU, this approach has taken Spidermonk from mobile to multi-platform developer.



A background in mobile game development has enabled to Spidermonk to work with much greater speed and efficiency

- **NAME:** Spidermonk Entertainment
- **LOCATION:** Grapevine
- **FOUNDED:** 2004
- **EMPLOYEES:** 8
- **URL:** www.spidermonk.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Roogoo*

What was it like to start out as a mobile-game company?
Spidermonk Entertainment was a company that I'd formed back in 2004 and there were just two of us. We started it in our home and we saw opportunities in mobile. So, we created some mobile games that were picked up by Hudson Entertainment and were successful. At the time, there wasn't a lot being done on mobile, so I think our games stood out, and they shipped on over 120 carriers worldwide.

But the mobile industry kind of came and went in a flash. It grew really quickly, and made me feel: 'Well, hey, I want to start a mobile games company', though my background is really in console games. But as the market began to die we started putting our own resources in console games and we developed an Xbox Live Arcade game, *Roogoo*. It was almost entirely self-funded, but publishers became interested and so we made *Roogoo* for the Wii and DS as well.

Do you feel the time in the mobile industry served Spidermonk well?
Yes. It's actually excellent. We were making a game every three to four months, which really makes you learn how to rapidly prototype a game, make it fun, pull the trigger and build it. So we use those same methodologies and put them in our larger products.

I think that one thing we didn't learn for our transition into console games is that in the traditional games industry you really need a good publisher or a good brand. Picking the right publishing partner and having the right brand, the right image and even the name of the game are things that we really need to be careful with in the future of moving forward and creating content.

Studio profile

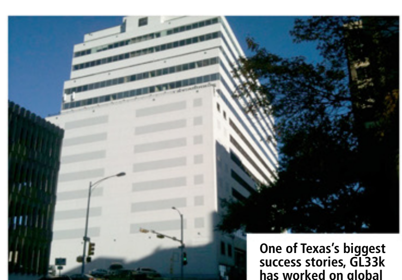


GL33K

Though the company provides audio services, gameplay is king to the artists at GL33k

Interview: Matt Piersall
Founder

From *Splosion Man*'s maddeningly addictive 'Donuts song' to the dense and impressive sound design of *Metroid Prime Trilogy*, if you've been impressed by the soundtrack of a game developed in Texas recently then it's likely it was touched by the hand of GL33k. An Austin-based game audio service company, it differentiates itself with its hands-on approach to integrating game audio and its ability to work across multiple genres, platforms and styles.

One of Texas's biggest success stories, GL33k has worked on global hits such as *Guitar Hero*

- **NAME:** GL33k
- **LOCATION:** Austin
- **FOUNDED:** 2005
- **EMPLOYEES:** 10
- **URL:** www.gl33k.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Metroid Prime 2/3, Guitar Hero 3/4/5, Ghostbusters* (Wii), *'Splosion Man, The Maw, Mushroom Men*

How does GL33k work with game developers as an audio contractor?
There is a difference between the first time a company comes to us with a game and the second time. The first time, they say, "This is our game, here is our budget – do it." So we kill ourselves for that client doing what we do to establish a long-term relationship. The second time they come to us and say, "Here is our project – what do you want to do?" As they see the deeper we get involved, the better the reviews are. They become a lot more accommodating and bring us in, a lot of times as early as first playable stage. They bring the concept and we just become part of the team. It's difficult sometimes because we are constantly crunching, essentially because we're always going from project to project, and they're all in a state of "We need this audio done now". But no matter what, we define and design and implement the vision of the audio as a whole.



What is GL33k's overall vision for game audio?
We're really intensely into keying off play. Play is king and that is the driving thing. I feel that some of the art of game audio has been lost because of all the processing power that we have now. It's very cool to have an incredibly cinematic approach. But at the end of the day the most important thing about game audio is it should be its own thing. It should have its own sound and it should not try and emulate film because it's so much cooler to me. It's so much more dynamic, so much more driven by the viewer experience. It's the difference between going to a dance club and actually dancing or sitting and just watching some singer-songwriter perform.

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Codeshop

Tracking developments in development



Cost of sales

The challenge for iPhone middleware companies isn't the size of the market but its commercial immaturity

Long disregarded, and even denigrated as something of a joke, the mobile-game development community has been reinvigorated over the past two years thanks to Apple's iPhone. But while some publishers and developers are starting to make decent financial returns, the sector is still characterised by small one- and two-man teams working on projects that are measured in terms of months and tens of thousands of dollars rather than man-years and millions.

It's particularly an issue for the middleware companies that have been attracted by this burgeoning activity. There are plenty of opportunities for coming up with interesting technology, but selling it for a price that allows building a sustainable business is proving more difficult.

One example is US outfit Gendai Games, which launched GameSalad Creator, its 2D drag-and-drop tool for iPhone and web, in September.

Originally released under a $499-per-year indie and a $1,999-per-year professional licence, within a couple of months the indie licence had been rebranded an Express membership and the price cut to $99 a year.

"At $99, GameSalad Express is accessible for students, for hobbyists, for people who have never made their own game before but would love to give it a try," explains Gendai's CEO **Michael Agustin** of the new price point. "You can develop and publish as many iPhone games as you want for less than the cost of your iPhone."

The psychological $99 mark has also proved to be a sweet spot for Ideaworks Labs, which opened up its enterprise-grade Airplay SDK to smaller developers in October. Previously limited to the likes of publishers such as EA and Konami, Airplay is a mobile game and application development environment which enables you to code in C++ and export versions of your games for platforms such as iPhone, Android, Symbian, Windows Mobile and BREW devices from the same binary.

Now, however, startups with an annual turnover of less than $50,000 can get access to the iPhone part of Airplay for free, adding support for other mobile platforms for a $99 per seat annual charge. Companies with turnovers of between $50,000 and $1 million pay $999 per seat per year, benefitting from dedicated support in the process.

"We're really excited because it's the first time anyone can go to our website and just download the code. We can't wait to see what people come up with and see how the community

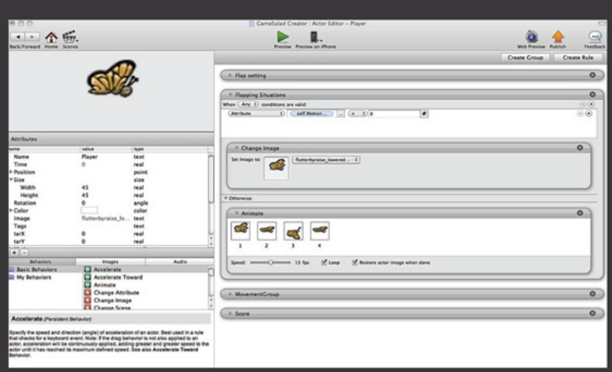
Michael Agustin, CEO, Gendai Games



Tim Closs, CTO, Ideaworks Labs



David Helgason, CEO, Unity

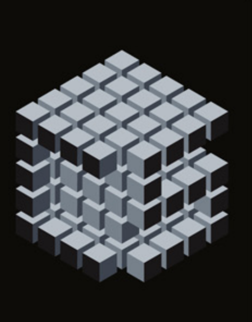




Unity3D (above) is a game engine for the creation of web, Wii and iPhone games, with a focus on scripting and drag-and-drop creation techniques. GameSalad (left) is a simple drag-and-drop game-making tool for students and hobbyists who want to develop iPhone games







develops around Airplay," says Ideaworks Labs' CTO **Tim Closs**, demonstrating that initially at least the new licensing model is as much about creating a vibrant development ecosystem than generating revenue.

Indeed, the first week of availability saw a lot of activity. "It's slightly knocked us for six, but in a good way. Certainly we didn't expect to hit 1,000 new users within the first week," Closs says.

Some companies are proving that the right mix of technology does enable them to target popularity and higher pricing, though.

Most notable in the iPhone space is the middleware company Unity, which released its first iPhone SDK, a version of its popular Unity3D game engine, over 18 months ago.



Backbreaker Football for iPhone (top left) was created using Ideaworks Labs' Airplay SDK, *Danger Cats!* for iPhone (below) was created using Gendai Games' GameSalad SDK, and *Ravensword* for iPhone (left) was created using the Unity3D iPhone engine



"You can develop and publish as many iPhone games as you want for less than the cost of your iPhone"

CEO **David Helgason** says he's been surprised at the commercial potential of the market, to which Unity makes available a $399 Basic and a $1,499 Advanced licence (both per seat).

"When we announced the release, the iPhone seemed like it would be a great platform for both big and small developers and a device that would be able to run Unity games quite well," Helgason recalls.

"It turned out that we were slightly wrong on both counts: the business opportunity turned out to be better than anyone had expected. And not only did the iPhone's PowerVR graphics chip take really well to Unity, but the iPhone has overall become a truly great gaming device."

Helgason claims that Unity is the most popular iPhone middleware, having been used in over 350 games including chart successes such as *Freeverse*, Graveck's *Skee-ball* and *Chillingo*, and Crescent Moon's *Ravensword*. "I think our iPhone customers have the clearest monetisation strategy in the industry," he says. "Many of them are getting incredible returns on investments."

Of course, supporting such a development community comes with its own costs. The latest version of the Unity for iPhone engine has been heavily overhauled to provided a threefold performance improvement, as well as adding features such as anti-piracy protection, and editing and profiling tools.

A good thing, then, that the company recently raised $5.5 million in its first venture funding round, although this investment will be spread across activity which includes web and console versions on the Unity engine.

Of course, the long-term success of any middleware company is built upon the ability to fulfil the needs of its core market, while also expanding the technology it offers as widely and cheaply as possible.

Each of the companies referenced here are aiming for different audiences – Gendai is targeting iPhone hobbyists, Ideaworks Labs has its sights on professional developers seeking to distribute their mobile games as widely as possible, and Unity has proved most popular with casual developers focused on digital distribution – so they're not direct competitors. But, as the mobile gaming market develops, those $99 annual licence intersections look likely to be the places where the sparks will fly.

www.gamesalad.com
www.ideaworkslabs.com
www.unity3d.com

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev



COMPANY NAME: Realtime Worlds

DATE FOUNDED: 2002

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 300+

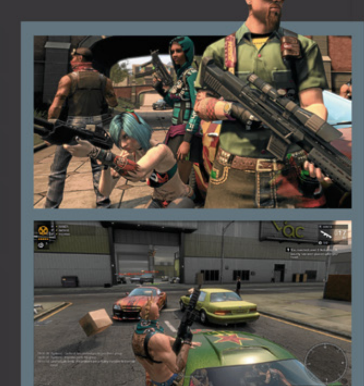
KEY STAFF: Dave Jones (creative director; below), Gary Dale (CEO), Ian Hetherington (chairman)





URL: www.realtimeworlds.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:
Crackdown









Above: Realtime chairman Ian Hetherington (left) and CEO Gary Dale. Screens: PC MMO actioner *APB*

LOCATIONS: Dundee, Scotland and Boulder, USA

CURRENT PROJECTS: *APB* plus an unannounced title

ABOUT THE STUDIO:

"Realtime Worlds was founded by Dave Jones in 2002, with a core of 15 staff from his previous studio, DMA Design, forming the company. The studio grew to about 70 staff when developing the BAFTA-award-winning *Crackdown*, and we have two development teams today, with about 150 staff working on *APB*, and another sizeable team working on our unannounced project. We recently expanded into another building to accommodate our growing teams, whose projects are fairly self-contained, with groups focused on code, art, design and audio, with experts in each discipline.

"Our philosophy is to create groundbreaking games and ideally new genres. It may seem like an ambitious goal, but with a legacy that includes *Lemmings* and *Grand Theft Auto*, we've done it before. Our staff work on truly unique projects with the potential to be the next big thing. To make this possible we believe in hiring only the very best people. We treat all our staff well and maintain a focus on work/life balance, and we offer a generous benefits package including paid overtime.

"We've partnered with EA to work on marketing and distribution of *APB* which will launch in Europe and North America in spring 2010. This year promises to be huge for us."



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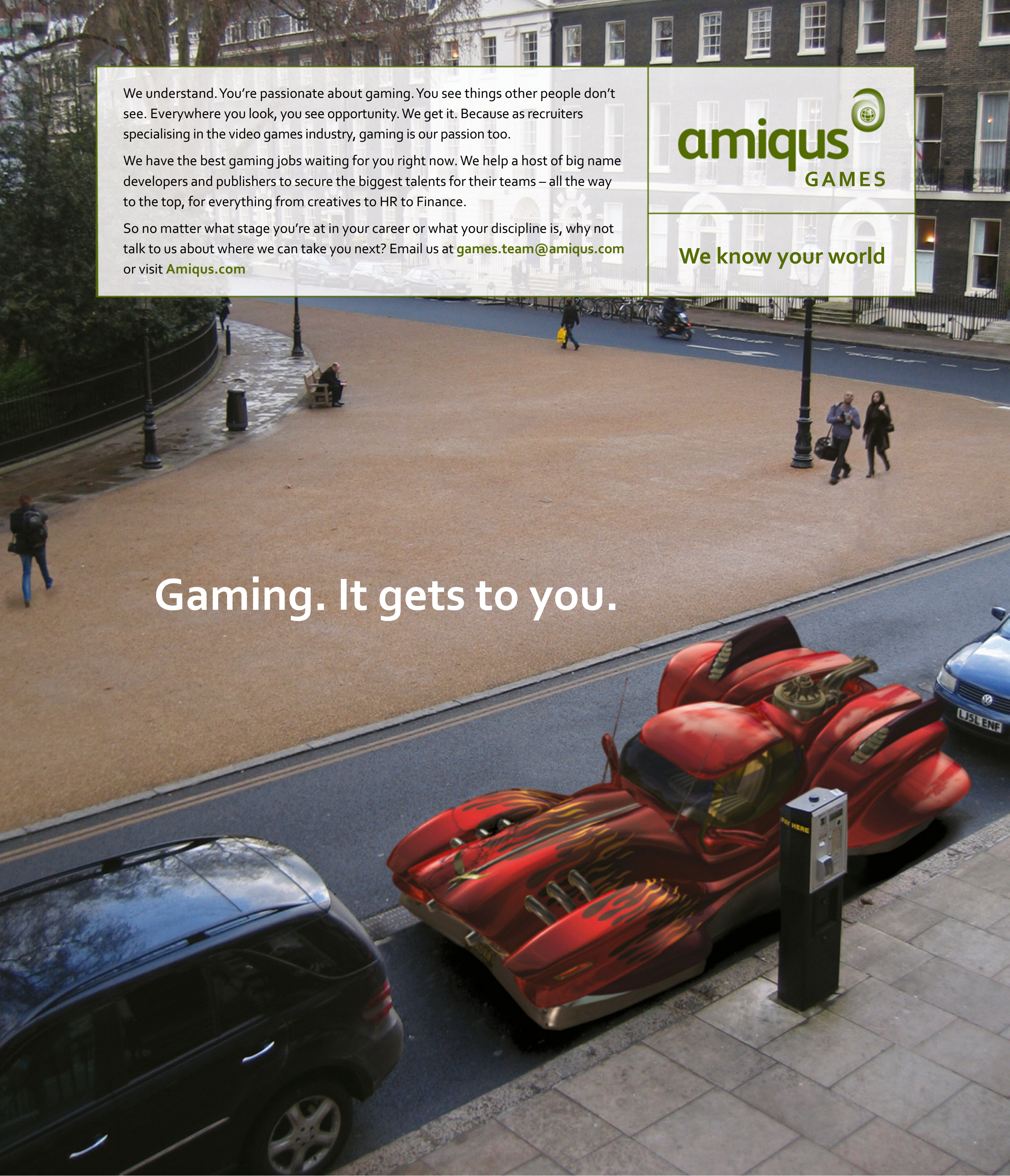
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Tom Williams: Technical Director - Blackrock Studio

Graduates say:

"After some years working as a programmer in small games companies, I decided to attend the MSc in Games Programming at Hull University to improve my CV and academic skills. It was probably the best investment of my life. Five months before the end of the course I got a job offer and now I'm working as a programmer for a AAA studio."

Manuele Bonanno: MSc Graduate 2008

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BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Journal of actually working on a videogame thing

Sept 29. Dear team: Updates and Lite versions are big in the iPhone market, and ours will establish a pattern of over-delivering. Our Update will be a 'director's cut' with tons of new content. Lite is going to be a new free game, *Hornet Smash*, an exploitation of *Spider*'s hornet tackling. It's due 'November 15', which probably means December 1.

Nov 16. MIGS. In my day, there was no such thing as a videogame university, but today the conference and the industry are filling up with degree holders. "It will be weird when the videogame heroes start to die of old age," they say, and cite names I won't repeat here. They smile and thumbs-up my 'Games don't have to be fun to be valuable' presentation, the one that elicited foaming dismissal from the crotchety and experienced. I wonder what this upcoming generation of developers bodes for the future of the artform. Their intention excites me, but will they build their skills in the trenches? Unconventional ideas often require technical chops. Yestermorrow, a hippie architecture school I happen to field trip to shortly after we ship, was founded on a "design/build" philosophy. "Having a well-rounded grasp of both architecture and construction improves the process, for example by allowing for more improvisation on the detail level, even informing the entire design."

Nov 26. *Spider* emerged from a typical hybrid design process, a tightening zig-zag of top-down, bottom-up. A top-level concept treatment fed down into crude prototypes which in turn fed upward to refine the vision: more exploration, more story, more conquering and hunting than we originally supposed. This fed back down into compatible mechanics, unit designs and the outlines of our story, which were prototyped and implemented, results again feeding back upwards: some ideas eliminated, some expanded. The overall vision settles during shipment. Even just building Director's Cut levels, even with all the uncertainty ironed out by the first game, there is some bottom-up. Mouse Hole was envisioned as a level of tunnels to explore, an idea prototyped and discarded during *Spider* because free camera control took the discovery out of exploration and cramped tunnels afforded too little freedom for web building. We focus this hopefully smarter attempt on insects that don't require webs, and we make use of our 'secrets' technology to cover up unexplored sections with a fog of war-type effect. (Artist) Amanda introduces the idea of decorating the Mouse Hole with trinkets stolen from the family: an earring, a toy solider, and quickly that idea ignites upward into the story of this mouse as told through set dressing, a microcosm of the whole game. I am mocking up mouse poops in Photoshop. I share my real-life house with mice, driven inside by the plummeting temperatures, so reference abounds. Mouse poops are evidence of where mice can go, and I realise I can use them to point observant players to sections of the level that are more hidden than others. Design/build.

> "I thought for sure gamers would fixate on the puzzle, but instead they all caught the tragic love story"

Nov 29. It's fallen out organically that (primary engineer) David owns *Hornet Smash*, leaving me with Director's Cut, the title of which is shaping up to be legit. We've already reincarnated the three levels that lay on the cutting room floor post-*Spider*, the gaps from which have generated some story confusion. I thought for sure gamers would fixate on the puzzle, but instead they all caught the tragic love story, presumably because we over-supported it in anticipation of a hard sell, or maybe this is an ironic lesson about the open-mindedness of our demographic. Survey says they're hungry for more about CK, the character we call Grampa, which fits well with our plan for revisiting his character in future games. He has a locked study where he sketched inventions and kept the mementos of his prior adventures. His blueprints depict clockwork machinery that I realise must be hidden in that secret spot in one of the other new levels.

Dec 1. Level art killed the schedule last time, but a team that's shipped a game is like a baseball glove well broken in. Other Randy (artist) even runs with just a Sharpie sketch and a couple of paragraphs of text. We're ahead of our twice-revised deadline, I tell David.

Dec 8. The slog. I've seen nothing but my desk and bedroom for a week. My girlfriend stays at her mom's. I have just enough programming wherewithal to start features David has to finish. It's already clear that Mouse Hole should have been larger if I wanted anyone to have trouble finding anything in there, but I kept the size down to keep the pixel resolution up, a foolish priority that has made my genius trail of poop idea redundant. The days are short in northern New England.

Dec 10. It's all done but the press release. Apple put us on the top of their Rewind 2009 list, which is going to confuse the data about whether our Lite/Update strategy was successful, but we're not complaining. This is a familiar place: relieved and proud, but nervous about reception.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, *is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch*

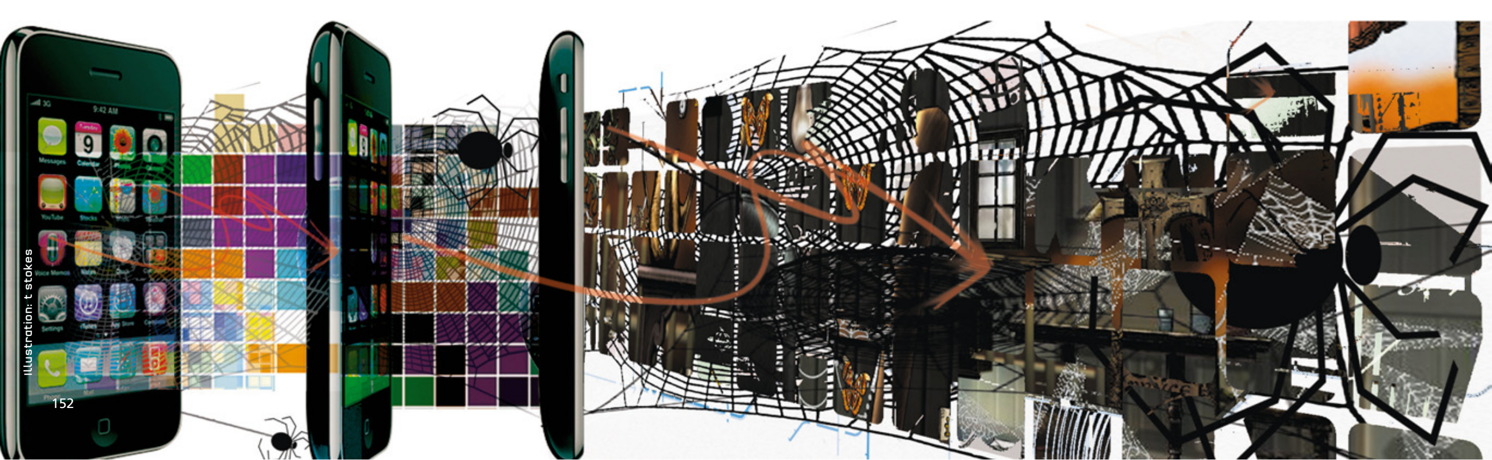


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BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Teenage kicks

Having not previously read Alan Moore's Watchmen, I recently found myself watching the film to get a handle on what all the fuss was about. I spent most of the film trying to grok the logic as to when the radioactive Smurf wears his dun-coloured briefs and when his schlong is allowed to swing free. (Surely his giant blue radioactive cock would have terrified the Vietnamese into more rapid submission?) But it was a line uttered by Rorschach that had me reaching for the rewind button: "Beneath me, this awful city, it screams like an abattoir full of retarded children". Uh, really?

Some diehard Moore fans have tried to defend this line, taken verbatim from the book, as a reflection of Rorschach's twisted character, but that doesn't fly for me. It's just spectacularly bad writing. That the city screams "like an abattoir" – maybe (although it's not abattoirs that scream, but the beings in them). "Like an abattoir full of children" – at a pinch (although it's too crudely obvious a contrast). But "like an abattoir full of *retarded* children"? Now the sentence has definitively jumped the shark. It's the kind of thing a 13-year-old might think sounded cool in an apocalyptic, 'dark' kind of way. And then I realised that Watchmen was in no way extraordinary but perfectly symptomatic: we are, after all, living through an age in which the fabulous ingenuity of craft is being lavished upon the realisation of a pathologically adolescent imagination.

Examples of this truth in videogames are, of course, too numerous to cite, because the overwhelming majority of videogames represent this fantastically juvenile application of incredible creativity and imagination; a gamer's enjoying *Bayonetta*, and then his girlfriend wonders why the lead character's clothes periodically fall off. Mumble, mumble. And that's just one of the more tasteful examples. The ludicrous geopolitics of *Modern Warfare 2*, meanwhile, resemble something that could only have been dreamed up by someone whose teen reading consisted solely of those Tom Clancy novels not actually written by Tom Clancy.

And what of *World Of Warcraft* and its elvish grind? A journalist recently insisted in The Guardian that *WOW* was the contemporary equivalent of the great medieval cathedrals. Say what? Well, the argument went, cathedrals were built by hundreds of craftsmen (just like *WOW*), and they were social spaces (just like *WOW*). Well, yes, as far as that goes. But isn't it rather a crucial difference that cathedrals were beautiful and *WOW* is a lurid, sub-Tolkien 'fantasy' world, daubed in the aesthetics of arrested adolescence? Cathedrals were free to enter, and were the only places where the vast majority of people could see art and hear cutting-edge music; *WOW* charges a monthly subscription, and you don't go there for the painting or the choral polyphony. No: *WOW* is *not* like a cathedral. It is like a global amateur-dramatics society with a wardrobe full of elf costumes – and there's nothing wrong with that. So why seek to claim instead, absurdly, that it's on a par with one of the pinnacles of western culture?

> "Forget World Of Warcraft; I've been showing non-gamers the trailer for The Last Guardian, and it takes their breath away"

Works in what used to be (wrongly) derided as merely trash culture are often overpraised when they show the first promise of what outsiders can recognise as intelligence and complexity. Watchmen was overpraised for its supposed political sophistication, but it was politically sophisticated only in comparison with most comic books. It pales when set beside something truly revolutionary, such as Art Spiegelman's Maus. (I don't even find Watchmen particularly interesting as drawing: give me Carlos Ezquerra's Dredd any day of the week.) The danger in such overpraise is that it can entice others to take a closer look, only to walk away with their generic prejudices confirmed. You can imagine an intelligent non-gamer thinking: well, if *World Of Warcraft* is what counts as videogames' equivalent of a 'cathedral', then videogames must be as childish and disposable as I had always assumed.

The frustrating fact is, of course, that other videogames exist that could be more justly compared (in a modest, limited way) with certain aspects of cathedral-building, in their aesthetic use of awe-inspiring space: but they aren't in general the games that feature elves or women in buttock-baring fighting dress. Forget *World Of Warcraft*; I have been showing non-gamers the trailer for *The Last Guardian*, and it takes their breath away.

One could speculate as to whether the general cultural problem of adolescent imagination arises from too hermetically narrow a set of influences on the artists involved. The conceptual universe of many graphic novels, fantasy-themed videogames and geek-service movies suffers an inevitable watering-down of quality through constant self-reference and regurgitation. The genres are denied the creative oxygen of interpollination with the wider cultural ecology. The result isn't so much a cathedral as a mausoleum. The acoustic is deadening, and soon the oxygen will run out.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net


illustration: t stokes

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PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Memory lane

BY N'GAI CROAL

The confession, in these very pages, brought me scorn: "I'm a relative newcomer to videogames, having only dedicated myself seriously to the medium – both as a journalist and as a player – since 1999." When I wrote those words in early 2008, I was only trying to make a point about how if developers would rethink their approaches to difficulty, progression and challenge in games, they might reach – and retain – larger audiences than they would otherwise. Yet some took my admission as proof that I wasn't qualified to be writing about games in **Edge**.

But when I consider my remark now, it reminds me that I'm at the end of my first full decade of gaming seriously. And, as such, it's worth a nostalgic look back at my favourite videogame-related moments the last ten years:

Getting the *Metal Gear Solid 2* demo disc with *Zone Of The Enders* and playing the tanker level over and over and over again. As great as the finished game was, it never quite measured up to the memory of the demo.

> "Making it to safety in Left 4 Dead, then running all the way back to save a downed buddy. Martyrdom never felt quite so satisfying"

Making it to the end of Area 5 in *Rez* and wondering if this is how the first audiences felt upon walking out of Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Months after playing Sega's *Virtua Tennis* on Dreamcast to the point of developing blisters, challenging a fellow game journalist to a best-out-of-three match on the arcade version at a Sega Joyopolis in Tokyo – and winning.

Coming close to setting up an unprecedented roundtable conversation among Shigeru Miyamoto, Hironobu Sakaguchi, Hideo Kojima, Yu Suzuki, Shinji Mikami and Kazunori Yamauchi... only to have it all fall apart when Sakaguchi has to return to Hawaii to continue directing Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within. Thankfully, Tetsuya Mizuguchi and Tomonobu Itagaki agree to join Mikami for a group discussion. Disaster averted.

Wishing I'd started playing games a decade earlier after getting sucked in to *Metroid Fusion* on the Game Boy Advance.

Getting my first pistol in level four of Rockstar North's *Manhunt*, and realising that what had previously felt like a single-minded, monochromatic experience was finally opening up into a multi-hued palette of brutality.

Sitting at PlayStation's US headquarters watching the developer play *God Of War*, then taking over and very quickly wondering how an American developer was able to make a thirdperson action game feel as smooth as those made by the best Japanese creators.

Failing to understand how to play *Lumines*, even with Tetsuya Mizuguchi standing next to me, patiently explaining it, during the Tokyo Game Show ahead of the PSP's launch. After the two shipped the following spring in North America, *Lumines* and my PSP were inseparable.

Playing a demo of Q Entertainment's PSP title *Every Extend Extra* at Sony's booth during E3, then coming back the next with my own PSP so that I could download the demo and keep playing it after the show was over.

Watching the introductory cutscene for the boss battle with The End in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* and saying to myself: "No way – they aren't going to..." and then realising, oh yes, they are. That and finally locating The End by the glint of light reflecting off the scope of his sniper rifle.

Realising that Criterion has fused the arcade racer with the fighting game in *Burnout 3*.

Nodding in agreement when a friend tells me that even though he no longer smokes and never will again, he'll always be a smoker. Because that's how I still feel about the fiendishly addictive and equally brilliant *Desktop Tower Defense* more than a year after having given it up.

Using the Saved Films feature in *Halo 3* to (a) get prominent journalists to send me screenshots of their first multiplayer kill, (b) make Tex Avery-like short films based on entertaining kills, and (c) drop behind enemy lines in the campaign and try to experience the game from the point of view Covenant forces minding their own business, only to get cruelly mown down by The Demon (Master Chief) and The Heretic (The Arbiter).

Falling asleep during the fourth hour of *Rock Band*'s Endless Setlist – then waking up near the end to help get our band, Manny Being Manny, over the finish line.

Faced with my first Harvest or Rescue moral choice in *BioShock*, and, unable to make a decision, calling friends and family from 2K Games' New York offices searching for advice.

Crowing on Twitter about beating my Xbox Live friends' high scores on *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved 2*... only to have them respond by jumping back on to retake their leads.

Making it to safety on the helicopter in *Left 4 Dead*, then running all the way back to the radio to save a downed buddy. Martyrdom never felt quite so satisfying.

Those are some moments out of time from my first full decade of gaming. May the second be just as rewarding.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com

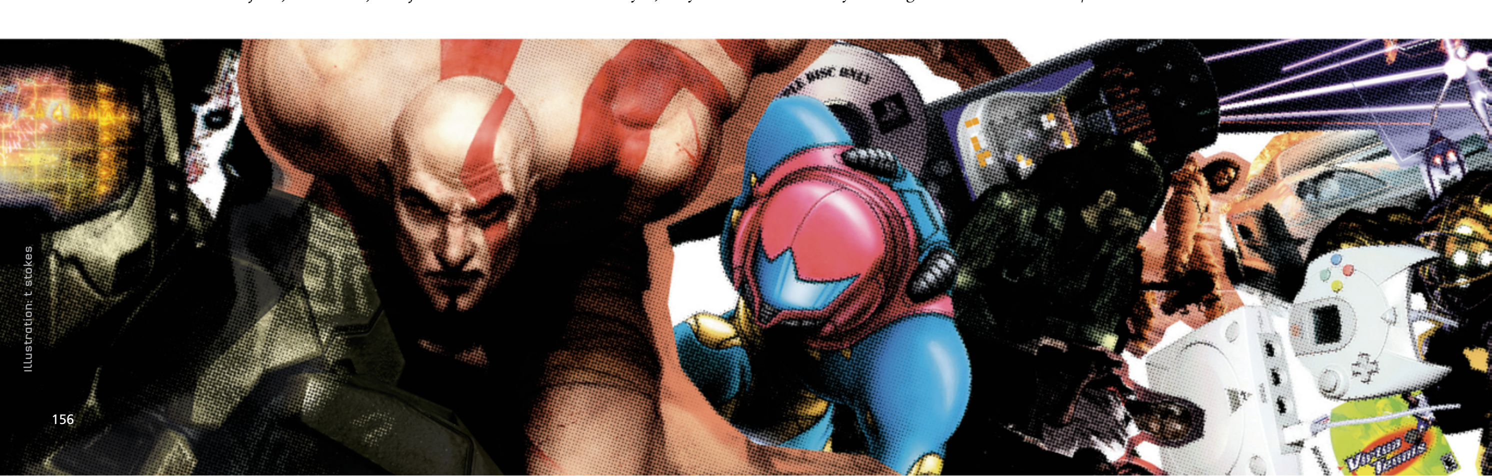


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Issue 210



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: "Joe Danger" – calling all Trials fans!

This game looks amazing – like a cross between *Trials HD* and *LittleBigPlanet* with a generous helping of Wacky Races and *Sonic The Hedgehog*.
djchump

Wasn't there an article about this in teh Edge a few months ago? Maybe I dreamt it up.
Kow

Yes, we exclusively revealed the game several months ago, and the lovely chaps behind it have an excellent column on edge-online.com. Sad face.
Rich Edge

Please tell me you're not disappointed in us. I thought we established a long time ago that no one here actually reads the magazine and that all we care about is the arbitrary allocation of random numbers. Tsk. Silly Rich.
darthjim

First off, I like the magazine. Great articles, varied perspectives and good coverage on the games industry. My one niggle is your rating system when reviewing games. There was a time when if I wanted to find out about a game prior to buying it, I'd pick up **Edge** and have a read. There was a great integrity in what I was reading. Unfortunately, those times have gone. I've been watching the magazine closely throughout 2009 and come to the conclusion that either **Edge** doesn't have its finger on the pulse when it comes to the attitudes and opinions of gamers out there, its rating system is that obscure that it doesn't reflect virtually any other review system out there (which pretty much makes comparing notes pointless) or it's in bed with some of these developers.

Take three examples (all additional data from Gamespot):

Fallout 3 (**Edge** 7/10)
11,440 user votes: 8.9
38 critic reviews: 9.0

Dragon Age: Origins (**Edge** 5/10)
6,165 user votes: 9.1
35 critic reviews: 9.0

COD: Modern Warfare 2 (**Edge** 9/10)
5,864 user votes – 6.9
23 critic reviews – 8.9

Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 interested me the most as I knew all the critics were hyping it up and all the users were coming away describing it as a load of shite. There are a great number of similar examples in 2009 alone. I've come to the point where I'll read user votes over critic reviews (if I bother to read critic reviews at all these days) as I no longer trust any of them. I'm going to throw **Edge** in that category as it seems to be missing the mark so often, it seems intentional. This all feels like politics to me.
Tristan May

If, in offering an appraisal of anything, your most important objective is to reach agreement with everyone else, you're doing it wrong. We can't, therefore, guarantee that our perspectives will always coincide with your own, but we can assure you that they will always be honest.

All those times you've screamed at the teenage girl in the slasher flick to keep quiet whilst the killer walks past her hiding place? Now you're in charge

Phooey to your assertion that Carla's asylum section in *Fahrenheit* was 'absurd' (**E**210).

Recently, you've written a number of articles about the value of storytelling, highlighting the importance of videogames finding their own narrative niche and using their traits to differentiate them from television, novels and films.

I'd argue that the section you highlighted in the asylum as 'absurd' is actually a fine example of creating a narrative in a way that can't be achieved with other media. For once, we didn't have to sit through a cutscene in which Carla explains in excruciating detail (and poor voice acting) that she's terrified of the dark, and if she's not careful she'll hyperventilate. Instead, the challenge is to control her fear to a soundtrack of her panicked breathing.



Letter of the month wins a DSi

All those times you've screamed at the teenage girl in the slasher flick to keep quiet and not make a noise whilst the killer walks past her hiding place? Now you're in charge.

Part of what makes this section particularly stand out is the presentation of inner conflict. Interesting characterisation is born of internal discord, and as well as presenting a psychological subtext, the section allows the characterisation to become part of the action. As good as a Chuck Palahniuk might be, you're still learning what you're being told/shown, not taking part.

As well as taking advantage of the medium, the section is also somewhat set apart from other games. It could have been a very different section – Quantic Dream could have made Carla a gung-ho, I'll-whack-'em-with-an-extinguisher action gal, filled the corridors with shambling zombie-men and turned the fear into a schlock-fest with the occasional set-piece to get the adrenaline going. It could have been like many, many horror films and games out there. For once, we have a protagonist who has a characterisation that stretches beyond 'my mom died and now I must avenge her'.

I will grant that *Fahrenheit* does have many absurd sections (the pregnancy,



giant dust mites and the entire last section of the game is full of 'wait, what?' moments), but it's disappointing that despite your increased interest in the role of gaming narratives, when presented with an opportunity to analyse a game that really tried to envelope, you've dismissed a genuine moment of trying for something different as silly.

That said, I'm enjoying your recent focus, as I think it's a fascinating topic to explore – please don't stop.
Carla Hodge

First time I've written to **Edge**, and sadly it's to moan about a review. Bet you don't get enough of those, eh? Review in question is for *Avatar* – ostensibly a review of the game but in essence more of a snide critique of the film. It was peppered with sneaky asides attacking James Cameron's movie, which would normally be fair enough (though oddly I don't remember many *GoldenEye* or *Riddick* reviews taking potshots at the film), were it not for what I believe is the massive debt videogames, western ones in particular, owe the crazy Canadian director.

In a recent interview, Cameron was reminded of the mass internet cynicism that greeted the first previews of his film. He was specifically asked what he thought of people who said that Avatar was "basically just *Halo*". His answer said a great deal: "Isn't *Halo* basically just Aliens?"

I would push his suggestion further – Aliens is in my opinion the most influential film in the history of videogames. *Metroid Prime*'s explorations of seemingly derelict outposts, *Half-Life 2*'s headcrabs, the whole space marine grunt ethos of the aforementioned *Halo*, *Gears Of War*, *Mass Effect* and *Killzone* – all of these rip things off from Aliens left, right and centre. Not to mention the similar influences the first two Terminator films had, and even The Abyss. Perhaps in future, **Edge** should do a feature on which films have been the most influential on games – I would put Saving Private Ryan close behind Aliens, personally.

James Cameron was asked whether Avatar was "basically just Halo". His answer said a great deal: "Isn't Halo basically just Aliens?"

My point is, one of the things I loved about the Avatar film (which is far more brilliant than the cynicism of your review suggested) was that it openly drew a lot of influences from videogames. And why not? Much has written about the gradual convergence of these two art-forms; as film employs more CGI and videogames get more cinematic, the line between the two is getting thinner. So if a film so openly embraces videogame culture as Avatar does (the plot that was so sneered at is far superior to plots in games that are described as amazing), shouldn't we be a bit more supportive of this? Especially if it's a film made by someone who, in a way, the industry owes a lot of its inspiration to?

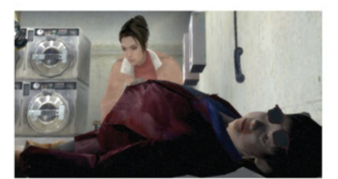
The Avatar film was criticised by a few film reviewers for too closely resembling a videogame – as though that would automatically be a bad thing. Again, massive disrespect given toward one art-form by someone who regularly writes for a different one. Shame to see such a respectable and usually more supportive magazine like **Edge** fall into the same trap.

The game was balls, though.
Mark Oosterveen

The review mentioned the film at its beginning and end, with the rest of its two pages dedicated to the game. Since *Avatar* has been marketed very much as a movie tie-in – unlike, say, *Riddick* – it's fair to look at it in context. But, OK, let's give Cameron credit for what is, as you say, a track record that has provided so much inspiration to gaming – and let's give you a Nintendo DSi.



Did our review of Ubisoft's *Avatar* reference its cinematic source too much? Mark Oosterveen reckons so



Carla Hodge thinks we were too harsh on Quantic Dream's ***Fahrenheit*** in last issue's Time Extend. For our pre-release thoughts on the developer's next game, see page 28



Topic: Achievements and the art of zen videogaming

My recent acquisition of a Wii has enabled me to gain some perspective on my 360 gaming.

I wouldn't necessarily describe myself as an Achievement whore, but I do have some Achievement whoring tendencies. I may do something in a game because it's been set as an Achievement, but only if I think it seems fun.

We all know why Microsoft introduced Gamerscore: to encourage people to buy more games, but mainly to engender brand loyalty through a sense of personal investment in a quantified catalogue of your gaming history.

So – Achievements: are they worth it or do they shackle us to our own gaming legacy?
Ken's Mullet

I don't want Achievements or Trophies while playing games. I don't want them there, I don't want them attached to my profile or anything. I don't want them at all. They should be optional, not just a choice about whether you see them or not.
Childintime

Never bothered with Achievements. Maybe that's why after three years I only have 9,000 Gs. I prefer to let my skill (or lack of in certain games) to speak for my gaming attributes.
Speedhaak

I like the idea of Achievements, but only those who make you do/try things you normally would never do in that game. Valve are great at this, both in *The Orange Box* and *L4D*.

I would never have carried that gnome through *HL2 Ep2* if it wasn't for that Achievement, and did it make the game new and exciting again? Hell yeah...
HaukC

The *World Of Warcraft* achievements are pretty ace. They still give you meaningless points but they also give you fun in-game stuff like mounts, pets and titles.

It is much easier to be an achievement whore in *WOW* because of this.
TheBlackFrost

There has been a lot of talk in the gaming press recently about the number of game releases postponed until early 2010 to avoid the *Modern Warfare 2* blast radius. I'm sure the sales and marketing teams at the various publishers did their research before deciding upon this course of action. However, I do wonder how it sits with what is supposedly a changing demographic for games players.

I remember when I was a teenage gamer, with nice long holidays for gaming, but never enough money to afford more than a few games a year. Back then, I would have welcomed the decision to stagger the releases of

Continued

triple-A titles rather than seeing them all come out in December.

Now, though, I am in my late 30s with a family and mortgage to worry about. I am what is commonly referred to as 'cash rich, time poor' – and, if the statistics are to be believed, I am part of a fast-growing proportion of the gaming public. I long for the Christmas break, as usually I have at least a week away from work in which to game – and I am in the very fortunate position of being able to afford any games I want. In 2009, though, my list of games for Christmas was somewhat shorter than usual, and I even resorted to buying games that ordinarily I wouldn't have touched, plus DVDs and books – in short, cash ready to go on games has gone elsewhere.

I wonder how many more years there are before the changing demographics of gamers brings us to a tipping point, whereby postponing releases around holiday times will actually result in more lost full-price sales than are ultimately gained with a delayed release.

Ian Carlson

At this time of year, when shoppers are out in their numbers, looking through their local game shop in order to pick up last year's big games at bargain prices, and when developers, publishers and retailers are lowering their prices or in other ways making their games more appealing in order to sell more copies and make more money, the only ones who don't seem to be benefitting are the loyal gamers.

It is they who pre-order copies of the next big game months before release. It is they who pay for and download the newest add-ons and expansions as soon as they are available. It is they who stand out in the rain at midnight to be one of the first to play the new release. It is they who play the same title for months on end. And it is they who lose when publishers decide to group together games and expansion packs for half their original price, or release previously paid-for content for free.

Obviously, this is merely market dynamics. When demand has almost flatlined for your year-old title, there is nothing better to counter this than to drop the price and include extra content in order to drum up more sales. There are many games guilty of this: *Fallout 3*, *Burnout Paradise* and *Fable II* have all been re-released at a cheaper price with extra (previously paid-for) content included. *Halo 3:ODST* also includes all of the previously-released *Halo 3* map packs for free. If you purchased all of these games and their respective add-ons separately, I'm sure you would be surprised to find out how much more you have paid in comparison to these 'game of the year' editions.

Developers and publishers are obviously entitled to charge whatever they want for their games, and include whatever content they like, but when you have paid full price for a title, played it for months on end and paid for numerous add-ons, to discover that the same content is now available for half or less of the total you have paid can only leave a bitter taste in your mouth. At this time of ever-increasing competition for consumers' hard-earned cash, surely developers and publishers should be rewarding rather than punishing their loyal gamers?

Aden Oxford

Further to the letters you published regarding the decline of the Japanese games industry in your December issue, I have been dwelling on the subject, and the answer I am afraid is becoming painfully clear. Videogames have been very dear to me since I was around six years old and always my collections were dominated by Japanese titles, the golden era for me being the good old days of the 16bit machines right up to the release of the Dreamcast and PlayStation 2.

Nowhere else could you find such exotic and imaginative experiences. Gameplay aside, the true appeal of gaming is escapism and never before had we been able to immerse ourselves in such incredible and colourful worlds full of engaging and creative characters. Back in those days it seemed the west was still in the stone age in terms of design, with a lot of titles looking tired next to their Japanese counterparts.

Now it's all changing; I look at my PS3 collection – great titles they may be, but sadly lacking on the Japanese front. This once-great empire of game design and production seems to have eaten itself. No longer are we treated to such flamboyant creativity, but an endless tirade of tired stereotypes. And the ironic thing is, it all seems this is the result of Japanese efforts to appeal to a western audience. No wonder we are looking a little closer to home to get our kicks these days, especially as western developers are finally getting a clue about stylish game design and innovation.

Come on, Japan, stop worrying about pandering to our western tastes and get back to doing what you do best!

Oliver Kemp



Oliver Kemp may find *Bayonetta* to his taste, as might anyone looking for a good old dose of 'traditional' Japanese design flamboyance



Topic: Like a fine wine

My current jaunt through *Castlevania: SOTN* on XBLA has left me more impressed than when I played it on its initial release. It's possibly because nowadays it's become so common for games to direct you from one checkpoint to the next as clearly as possible just to avoid any chance of you getting lost and giving up, that there's something refreshing about a game that throws you into a massive castle and says: 'Right, off you go then'. One can explore properly, stumble upon whole new areas accidentally and even do things in different orders. And the way it gradually gives out its powers, allowing you the ability to explore just a few more areas at a time before suddenly opening up nearly everything when you get the bat power is genius. And I haven't got to the 'twist' yet.

Seeing as most games age badly or at best can be appreciated despite certain iffy old fashioned game mechanics, it's quite rare to have something that offers more (and is definitely better than the five or so similar sequels released since) even than it did 12 years ago.

Any other games that have 'matured' with age?

JB

'Getting lost and giving up' is exactly what I did with *SOTN*! But I do agree with the points you made about why the game's good.

***Silent Hill 2* stands out as a game that will be timeless. Nothing I've played has come close to the complex cerebral layers that elevate it beyond a simple 'game'.**

fullspectrum

***Zelda: Ocarina Of Time*, *FFVII* and *Pokémon* are the only three games I still play and enjoy as much if not more than I did. I think a lot of games are enjoying a new lease of life thanks to PSP and PSN network. I still venture back to *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* thanks to it being on my PSP. Can't beat a good ol' skirmish.**

kaysar

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